

**The Gift of Remembrance:
A Part of Korean History as Seen Through My
Grandmother's Eyes**

by

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할머니, 사랑해요!



Introduction

*Remember the days of old;
consider the generations long past.
Ask your father and he will tell you,
your elders, and they will explain to you.
- Deuteronomy 32:7¹*

After much thought and reflection, I have decided that the most appropriate topic for my senior thesis is to recount my grandmother's life story. In order to explain my intention to write about this topic, I feel that it is best to begin where my passion for East Asian Studies originated.

Two years after I was born, my parents decided to leave Korea. Nine years prior to our departure (and 7 years prior to my birth), their lives changed entirely with the sudden reappearance of my grandfather, whom they had thought was dead.² In 1949, my grandfather left his wife and three-year-old son behind in Korea, got on a smuggling boat to Japan and disappeared for thirty years. His sudden return affected my family in many ways. My grandmother was no longer a widow and my dad was no longer a "fatherless bastard." After many years of adversity and failure in Japan, my grandfather's business finally began to boom, and he wanted to compensate them for the years he was gone. However, when they discovered that he was still living in

¹ Deut 32:7 NIV

² To give a starting point, I was born in 1985.

Japan as a member of the North Korean *Chochōngyōn*³ Party and had married a Japanese woman, what seemed a blessing became a threat.

Not only were relations between Korea and Japan strained in the latter half of the twentieth century (after Japan had made Korea its colony for nearly four decades), but relations between North and South Korea were hostile as well. It was a dark time in Korean history, in which the people had to deal with both the mental and physical devastation left in the aftermath of civil war and national division. There were demonstrations demanding reparations from the Japanese, and Koreans who had any connection to them were considered traitors who had sold their nation for personal best interest. Furthermore, South Korea lived in constant fear of Northern invasion. Accusing someone of communism was the ultimate insult.

In the early 1970s, President Park Chung-hee initiated a crackdown against spies. After 1968, when a unit of North Koreans attempted to assassinate President Park and guerilla troops invaded the eastern coast of the southern peninsula, the South Korean government deemed the situation “code-red” and intensified the nation’s defense system.⁴ Many people were accused of espionage and were either executed or sentenced to life imprisonment. This paranoia affected many South Korean citizens, including my family. If someone was reported to have disappeared, they were assumed to have defected to the north, and their families were kept under intense surveillance, becoming the center of negative public attention. They could

³ 조총련/朝總聯 /“The General Federation of Korean Residents in Japan” - a pro-Pyongyang federation of Korean residents in Japan. Being abroad, many Koreans were unaware of the degree of political division between North and South Korea. *Chochōngyōn* members propagated their party values under Korea’s original name of Chosōn and offered a Korean education and financial aid to the unsuspecting Korean Japanese communities.

⁴ Jungwon Alexander Kim, "Divided Korea 1969: Consolidating for Transition," *Asian Survey* 10.1 (1970): 31-32.

not find employment and no one was willing to marry into the family. Essentially, to have a defector in the family was to be blacklisted. It was at this time that we heard from my grandfather.

Having gone to Japan just as the Korean War began, my grandfather was unaware of the general situation in Korea, and when the Chochōngyōn Party offered help, he signed up as a member. We discovered this after my dad went to Japan to reunite with his long-lost father. Before and after anyone went abroad, especially if the trip was to Japan, one needed to undergo mandatory ideological training to make sure one held no radical ideas against the government.

After his return to Korea, my dad was under suspicion by his neighbors and friends, who repeatedly reported him to the authorities as a North Korean spy.⁵ Over the years, my dad was interrogated by the Korean secret service, who eventually knew him so well that they apologized and discretely suggested that he leave the country.⁶ Being under constant surveillance and later suffering the loss of their oldest child, my parents decided to leave the country and immigrate to the United States as missionaries. This is what brought me as a two-year-old to America.

Although I went to an American school and absorbed the American culture, my parents constantly reminded me that I must never forget my Korean heritage. While my friends signed up for after-school activities, I came home and learned how to be Korean. In our kitchen, my mom taught me to read and write the language,

⁵ I am told that the Korean government's promise of a great monetary reward (in the 1970's and '80's, the reward was up to 50,000,000 won) for reporting spies was a good incentive for people to report on their neighbors as spies. Once reported, that name would be blacklisted throughout the country and the person's every move would be monitored by the secret service. If the person were found to be innocent, he/she would be released with an apology, but not much else.

⁶ My dad once told me that a few times, he helped the South Korean government by covertly retrieving important documents from Chochōngyōn members that he met in Japan.

saying that it was the only legacy she had to give me, and that in the future I would bow to her in thanks. My parents did not allow English in the house, and bedtime stories consisted of chapters on Korean history, biographies of famous Koreans, Korean folk tales, and the Korean Bible. But the story of my family always followed: who my grandmother is; why she lived with us; and why my grandfather was living in Japan with a woman we call *Obaa-chan*.

As I grew up, I never put Korea out of my mind. I knew that the moment I forgot it would be the moment I lost my identity. I may speak English and carry around a piece of paper that declares that I am a citizen of the United States, but Korea is the home of my ancestors; to forget is to dishonor them. Despite this idea being drilled into my young head, at times I felt embarrassment and uncertainty as to why I needed to learn the things I was learning. Along with humiliation, I also felt resentful that when learning world history, China and Japan were the representative “Asian” countries, while Korea somehow failed to become a country worth teaching about.

At Wesleyan University, I eagerly started my search for courses about Korea in the East Asian Studies department. However, I found only a few courses, and was devastated when I was told that if I wanted to do Korean Studies, my best bet would be to transfer to a different university. I resolved to find another way to achieve my goal. I began by taking courses in Chinese history, art, and literature, as well as pre-modern Japanese history. Through this approach, I began to notice significant similarities between the three neighboring countries and finally recognized that they were profoundly interrelated. By studying one country, I saw the other two countries

from a different perspective, which deepened my knowledge and appreciation for the culture and history of countries other than Korea.

As I delve deeper into East Asian Studies, I begin to understand the value and importance as a Korean-American to understand the history and past of not only America, but also the country of my parents and grandparents. “Remember the days of the old” is a reminder for us to look to the past, to learn from it, to make it part of the present. I am aware of how close I was to losing this precious gift of remembrance; for the past two decades my grandmother has been waiting for me to hear her words, to understand that her story is my story, my history, my legacy. Her words tell a story of one woman’s determination to survive, her love and loyalty to her country, and her unfaltering faith in God.

My grandmother’s story teaches me that historical issues are never clear-cut; depending on the person through whom you see the past, there are many different accounts describing one event. Likewise, Korean-Japanese circumstances before, during, and after the colonial period cannot be simply described as a power-hungry nation’s desire to conquer and harass the weak. Neither is it a romantic story of nationalism in which the people of an oppressed nation united to fight a common enemy. We see only a linear narrative, the fragments chosen to be preserved as history – the histories of the political activists and the soldiers, but not the civilians caught up in its wake. Hers is a story that is forgotten. That is why I must remember.

I decided to start this project in my sophomore year of college, and much of this thesis is based on several interviews with my grandmother over the period of a few years, beginning in the summer of 2005. The interviews were conducted in

Korean, which I have transcribed and translated into English. The first chapter is my reflection on my grandmother's youth, which I had heard about during our conversations, while the second and third chapters are based on my grandmother's journal (which she started at my request), recounting her time in Manchuria.

On one hand, this thesis is a personal quest to record my grandmother's past. On the other hand, I have come to the realization that there is a great disparity between the personal memories of my grandmother and the discourse of memory in Korea since World War II. This brings up the basic question: how do my grandmother's experiences help establish the context of modern-day relations between Korea and Japan? My last chapter is an attempt to address this question through an analysis of the social and political situation in Korea after World War II and comparing it to my grandmother's personal experiences.

Prologue

August 15, 1945. How can I forget that day; a day of absolute defeat for some and long-awaited liberation for others? I had already been on the road for twenty days. I was twenty-four years old, alone in Manchu territory, with my infant son strapped to my back. Your grandfather was away on business, and my mother-in-law and father-in-law were visiting their daughter in Korea. Thinking it was another war drill, I grabbed a handful of grain powder, molasses, a few cloth diapers, and a thick blanket. Then I ran out, into the screaming crowd.

My grandmother. My *Halmõni*. She sits with her right knee tucked under her armpit and the left leg bent in front to hide her right foot. She might as well be seated regally on a padded seat cushion in a traditional Korean room with heated *ondol* flooring, wearing a long *hanbok* skirt. However, she is sitting in a corner of our tiled kitchen floor in America with yesterday's newspaper spread all around her. In front of her is a small basin of water with unpeeled garlic bulbs bobbing up and down. Her small, wrinkled hands quickly fish out each one to peel it and add it to the ever-growing pile of creamy white cloves that have just started sprouting green. The kitchen is permeated with the pungent smell of garlic, the perfect atmosphere for another one of *Halmõni*'s war stories.

"*Halmõni! Yetnal yagi hejo!* Grandma! Tell me an old story!" I am seven years old, urging *Halmõni* to end my boredom with what seems to me a legend, a folk tale. Gradually, as years go by, and my load of school work grows bigger, I don't have time for *Halmõni* and her stories. Geometry and U.S. History are more important than something as foreign and distant as the Korean War; being with my

friends and watching television more interesting than sitting in the kitchen watching Halmõni peel garlic or pick the wilting leaves off a stalk of *pah*, scallion. When teachers ask who my heroes or heroines are, I proudly answer, “Florence Nightingale” or “Amelia Earhart,” naming famous women from European or American history, not realizing that a woman just as honorable and worthy of respect is living in the room next to mine.

The end of the Second World War was drawing near on the Asian continent. Tensions were running high between the conquerors and the colonized. Korean Freedom Fighters were in hiding everywhere, ready to take drastic measures for Korea’s independence. On July 26, 1945, Halmõni was crouched in a bomb shelter in Manchuria. Her husband and in-laws were away, leaving her by herself to take care of her month-old son. Afraid for her and her son’s safety and confused by the hoards of people fleeing the city, Halmõni stayed in the shelter for two days before deciding to follow the crowd and leave Manchuria. Less than a month after Halmõni started on her journey, on August 15th, Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) publicly announced Japan’s surrender to the Allies. Korea had finally gained its independence from Japanese rule.

Halmõni traveled for two months, night and day, walking and stealing rides in freight trains that took her all over Northeast China until she finally reached her father’s house in the southern tip of Korea. She tells me how she narrowly escaped getting sexually assaulted by Soviet soldiers by smearing mud on her face and covering her son in dirty rags. She tells me how she contemplated suicide on a bridge on a moonlit night, but could not jump out of pity for her infant son. I had heard this

story so many times that her voice began to be drowned out by the noises of American life. I am part of a generation that is gradually forgetting its origins. Halmõni realizes this, and when she looks at me her eyes reflect the urgency of needing to tell her Americanized granddaughter about the past we both share.

Chapter One

Through her stories, I begin to see Halmöni in a new light; she is no longer the uncomplicated woman I thought her to be. Halmöni's determination and her faith in a higher power has become the basis for my own existence in this world. She faced death many times, but each time, a hand reached out to her, rekindling her resolve to live. Rather than allowing herself to wallow in resentment and self-pity, she conquered desperation and accepted her situation, using the pain she had suffered as inspiration to help others. Halmöni confesses that this path was not of her own choosing. She was not able to rise above adversity solely by her own strength of will or goodness; it was her faith in God's providence that carried her through life.

I am 20 years old, back from school for winter break. Halmöni's 4' 10" frame quickly sits up from a reclined position, where she had been staring blankly at the staticky television screen. The sound is muted; she can't hear anyway. Her face lights up, like a child who has just been offered sweets. For the first time since middle school, I had asked her to tell me about her childhood. It always amazes me how this hard of hearing eighty-six year old woman who spends her days quietly in her room napping or reading her tattered leather Bible can show so much excitement and energy when I ask her to tell me about her past. Her eyes sparkle, her hearing seems to improve. I don't need to shout or write anything down for her to understand me. I brew a pot of green tea and set two teacups on the little island in the center of

our kitchen, one before her and one before me. Halmõni lets out a little sigh of happiness as she nimbly climbs onto a stool and begins her story.

Family and Childhood

“I was not always your Halmõni. There was a time when I was a young girl like you. I didn’t have a single wrinkle on my face or a care in the world. I wore pretty cotton hanbok dresses, dyed delicate yellows, pinks, and greens. My hair was as black as yours and your sister’s. It was long, shiny, and braided down my back with a scarlet ribbon at the end.

“I was loved by my grandparents and parents; I was loved by my brothers and sisters. Life was peaceful and predictable; I often played in my grandparents’ room, watching my Harabõji read the Bible and listening to my Halmõni at her loom, weaving cloth. When my parents called out my name, “Jong-soo yah!” I would run to them with a shy smile (girls weren’t supposed to be as loud as American girls are nowadays) and be lovingly embraced.”

Halmõni was born on January 21, 1921 in number 702 of Chungni-dong, a farming village along the southeast coast of the Korean peninsula. She lived with her paternal grandparents, parents, siblings, and her siblings’ children, together in a large home in Ŭisõng County of North Kyõngsang Province. By the time of her birth, it had been eleven years since Korea was officially annexed by Japan in 1910⁷, nearly one hundred years since Protestantism had been introduced.

⁷ Under the terms of the Taft-Katsura agreement of 1905.

Halmöni's grandfather, Park Ch'il-gŭn was originally a *dalbi* (hair extension) merchant from Ch'ungchöng Province.⁸ When his business thrived, he moved to South Kyöngsang Province to expand his business. This was where he met Halmöni's grandmother, Tak Sun-yi. They married and moved to Ŭisöng County in North Kyöngsang Province where Halmöni's father, Park Namsan, was born in 1892. Park Namsan grew up and married Kim Sun-yi, with whom he had eight children (of whom Halmöni was the third). Park Namsan had a jewelry business, selling hair ornaments called *binyö*.⁹ On the side, he owned a small oil shop, where he sold a variety of cold pressed oils such as sesame, perilla, coconut and peanut oils. Halmöni tells me that, once, a Japanese person stopped by her father's store and taught him about cosmetic creams that Japanese women used. They started doing business, trading their beauty secrets for the finished body cream products made in the store. Despite the common conception of the time, Japanese and Koreans could be business partners, even friends.

⁸ *Dalbi* was a crucial part of married women's dress; while unmarried girls kept their hair in a long braid, married women were required to distinguish themselves by wrapping this long braid either into a knot on the back of their heads or an elaborate loop around the head. Often times, women needed to add extensions to achieve the hair styles that were in vogue.

⁹ Women of the Chosön period considered the *bi-nyö* as a critical part of a married woman's attire. It was not until after King Yöngjo's reign in the 17th and 18th centuries that the design of the *bi-nyö* developed into more elaborate and diverse creations. The *bi-nyö*'s shape and material was very different according to the social class that the woman belonged to. Gold, silver, pearl, jade, and coral *bi-nyö*s were mostly used by upper class women, and wood, horn, copper, and brass were more commonly used for the common people. The shape of the *bi-nyö*'s head was consistent with the wearer's social rank; the queen's *bi-nyö* had a head in the shape of a dragon or phoenix, while the rest of the populace commonly had *bi-nyö* with round or mushroom-shaped heads. (Kyung-ja Lee, Na-young Hong, Suk-hwan Chang and Mi-ryang Lee, 우리 옷과 장신구 Woori Ot-Gwa Chang Shin-Gu, 2003, Kyungpook National University Museum.)

Education

“When my Oppa (elder brother) was in school, elementary school consisted of six grades. There were cases in which both father and son would enroll in the same school; the son enrolled in 1st grade and the father in 6th grade. Oppa told me a funny story about one such man and his son. The son was in Oppa’s 3rd grade class. His father was in the classroom next door, only two grades higher than his young son. When the son called out, “Abōji!” in the hallway, his father got embarrassed and became very angry. Dragging his son to a corner of the school building, he threatened to beat him when they got home. ‘If you call me Abōji (father) one more time, I’ll thrash you!’”

Coming from a relatively wealthy family, Halmōni and her siblings were all sent to school and, except for the eldest son, all went to a church kindergarten. Other families could not afford the school fee, although it was only a few cents a month. At the time, most of the schools were built by Christian missionaries. Later, the Japanese government reformed the elementary education system.¹⁰ American geographer Ellen Churchill Semple observed the Japanese colonial education policies:

Common schools were being rapidly established over the whole country, middle and normal [a.k.a. elementary] schools in the towns and cities, agricultural schools and experimental farms in various places and agricultural classes embodied in academic courses of study. Textbooks compiled by the educational department are sold for a few pennies or distributed free. For the

¹⁰Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 213. Also, elementary schools were called “common schools” and above those were “high common schools.” Most towns didn’t have high common schools, so not many people received more than an elementary school education.

first time, apart from what the mission schools could offer, the Korean girls have an equal chance with the boys.¹¹

When the new elementary schools were built, many villagers jumped at the opportunity to enroll: “Education has not yet been made compulsory in Korea, yet the number of voluntary applications is overwhelming.”¹²

In school, boys were encouraged to learn sports on top of their academic studies. Semple writes, “The boys’ schools provide not only a full course of study, but every stimulus in the form of physical training to...arouse ambition and the corps spirit...”¹³ Halmöni’s elder brother learned tennis, judo, and soft ball tennis at school.¹⁴

When pressed about the overall impact of the Japanese colonial period, Halmöni begrudgingly admits that the Japanese did do some good. One major benefit for Korea was the educational reform that was implemented (before official annexation): “Political and social reform (*Kabo-Kyungjang*) was carried out in 1894 as Japanese political forces demanded...the creation of new educational systems from primary and secondary to vocational and foreign language schools.”¹⁵ However, the improvements they made in Korea were quickly overshadowed by the ill-treatment and discrimination they showed to the Korean natives.

Toward the end of the Chosön Dynasty, around the time of the Japanese arrival in Korea, Korea was beleaguered by “a weak and complaisant court, a rapacious class of officials, endemic bribery and corruption, mismanaged finances

¹¹ Ellen Churchill Semple, "Japanese Colonial Methods," Bulletin of the American Geographical Society 45.4 (1913): 268.

¹² Tadao Yanaihara, "Problems of Japanese Administration in Korea," Pacific Affairs 11.2 (1938): 204.

¹³ Semple, "Japanese Colonial Methods," 268.

¹⁴ Tennis played with a softer, rubber ball.

¹⁵ Jeong-Kyu Lee, "The Establishment of Modern Universities in Korea and Their Implications for Korean Education Policies," Education Policy Analysis Archives 9.27 (2001).

and chaotic currency, and technological backward-ness....”¹⁶ Part of this backward-ness included women’s education. In the early twentieth century, the education of women was still a contentious issue. The elders in Halmõni’s village disapproved of educated girls, saying that educated women were destined to be ill-fated. It was believed that when the wife knew more, or thought she knew better, than the husband, the couple would be in constant discord. The woman would not stop nagging and would hurt her husband’s pride by acting as the better of the two, leading the husband to violence. Yi Kwang-su describes the rights, or lack thereof, of Korean women before Christianity: “...in Korea a woman was no better than a domestic animal. She was denied the privilege of an education. To assert her personality or to engage in an independent livelihood was never dreamt of.”¹⁷ The only educated Korean women at the time were the *Kisaeng*, women entertainers.¹⁸ Fortunately for Halmõni, her father and grandfather were enlightened by the Christian missionaries and supported the idea of educating their daughters.¹⁹

Moreover, except for the Christian missionary schools, which were private, all of the public schools were taught by the Japanese. This meant that Korean was not to be spoken by the students. What was the use of going to school if you were not going to be taught the Korean language and Korean history? However, when I asked Halmõni about the language restriction, she replied that although Korean was not

¹⁶ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* 71.

¹⁷ Kwang-su Yi, "The Benefits Which Christianity Has Conferred on Korea," *Korea Mission Field* 14.2 (1918): 34.

¹⁸ More on *Kisaeng* in Christianity section.

¹⁹ The Western missionaries were the first to teach the Korean people to write their own language [after 400 years of disuse since King Sejong created the Korean alphabet in the 15th century] – *Hangeul*. They taught the women and low-class men in order to facilitate the understanding of Christianity, because *Hangul* was much easier to learn and use than Chinese characters. (Lee, "The Establishment of Modern Universities in Korea and Their Implications for Korean Education Policies.")

allowed to be spoken, people spoke it at home. It was mainly at schools, public places, and in the presence of Japanese soldiers or officials that people spoke Japanese. When I asked about the churches, there wasn't much to be said. Policies were harshly imposed only during the last few years of occupation, and Halmöni was in Manchuria for most of this time.

After elementary school, students struggled to continue their studies. The nearest middle school was in Taegu, and therefore inaccessible to most people in Ŭisöng County. Luckily, a young man who had studied in America and returned to Korea started a youth association (Y.M.C.A) for those who wanted to continue their education. He hoped to enlighten them on matters of the nation and teach them recreational activities, such as sports and music. Halmöni's elder *Oppa* joined the association after graduating from elementary school, and along with becoming more politically aware, he was educated in music and arts. Being quite skilled in crafts, he learned jewelry-making and helped out his father's business, making various ornaments to sell at the store. Halmöni's uncle was the same age as Halmöni's brother, so he joined the group, too, and learned how to play clarinet, trumpet, and trombone. They organized themselves into a theater troupe with other young men and put together plays, music festivals, and sports matches that entertained the village people. The Y.M.C.A was closed down by the Japanese in the early 1930s, because it supposedly taught the youth to be rebellious against the government.

By the time Halmöni was in the fourth grade (1932), Korean language books were no longer available. The phrases, "our country Korea" and "our *Chosön*" were

not allowed to be uttered in school.²⁰ Furthermore, the book Su-shin (修身), a nation-wide textbook teaching Korean moral culture was eliminated from the students' curriculum.²¹ Furthermore, the Japanese officials confiscated and burned some history books and biographies of famous Koreans in pursuit of a policy of intellectual censorship.²² Korean language text books were replaced by Japanese language texts:

The principal subject of study in Korean schools is the Japanese language, which is indispensable for the unification of Koreans and Japanese... education in the Japanese language is intended to make possible for the natives a full understanding of the administrative system run by Japanese officials... and the ultimate aim is the Japanization of Koreans for the sake of a cultural unification of the two peoples.²³

The Japanese officials only thought of cultural unification, but did not think through their strategy thoroughly enough. They did not suspect that the natives would dare to resist, viewing this policy of cultural assimilation as nothing more than an attempt at cultural annihilation. In general, the Japanese did not respect the Korean natives as the people of what was once an independent nation; rather, Korea was viewed as a Japanese colony, and the people were conquered under the rules of Social Darwinism: "...most Japanese in Chosŏn saw Korea as a colony, the annexation as conquest, and themselves as bold colonizers."²⁴ It is no surprise that their attempt at reform aroused resentment among the Koreans.

²⁰ *Chosŏn* is the name of Korea during the *Chosŏn* (Lee) Dynasty from 1392 C.E. to 1910 C.E. It was also used by the Japanese during the colonial period, *Chōsen*.

²¹ "Schools included moral education as a core component of their curriculum, and educators were expected to set proper examples so as to lead young people to respect Asia's enduring traditions" (William K. Cummings, "The Asian Human Resource Approach to Global Perspective," Oxford Review of Education 21.1 (1995): 70.)

²² David Brudnoy, "Japan's Experiment in Korea," Monumenta Nipponica 25.1/2 (1970): 168.

²³ Yanaihara, "Problems of Japanese Administration in Korea," 204.

²⁴ Brudnoy, "Japan's Experiment in Korea," 168.

Well-known professor of colonial studies and Christian pacifist, Yanaihara Tadao (referred to as “the conscience of the Japanese”) points out that the Japanese assimilation policy was overzealous and problematic in its demand that Koreans cast off their identity as the people of Chosŏn and become “Japanized” in order to enjoy political and social rights:

Even after a foreign language has been fairly widely spread it does not necessarily follow that the natives of a country will change their outlook and national identity – as has been proved in the case of the Irish. If equality of political rights and privileges is to be granted the Koreans only after their complete Japanization, according to the theory of the Japanese Government’s assimilation policy, the day when the Koreans will be able to take an equal share in the political rights and privileges of their country is yet far off...²⁵

David Brudnoy sympathizes with the Koreans’ resentment, explaining that the Japanese policy of assimilation made the Koreans feel that “their national pride and culture was destined for eradication...that acquiescence to Japan was treason to Korea, and that something had to be done if the national entity ‘Korea’ was not to be totally submerged under the mantle of *nikkan heigō*, the Japanese term for annexation.”²⁶ Furthermore, according to Sung-gun Kim, “...the policy of cultural assimilation failed, mainly because of the widespread and institutionalized practice of racial discrimination.”²⁷ Denying someone their God-given rights for failing to give up their national identity is unreasonable.²⁸

Yet, strictly speaking, if a hopeless man whose family is starving and whose own country is corrupt and cheating him out of his money is forced to choose

²⁵ Brudnoy, "Japan's Experiment in Korea," 168.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sung-gun Kim, "The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christianity under Japanese Colonialism," *Journal of Church and State* 39.1 (1997): 504.

²⁸ Koreans became aware of the notion of human rights and equality after the arrival of American missionaries and the dissemination of Christian teachings in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

between being treated like a dog for keeping his national identity and being able to feed his family by becoming Japanized, he would probably become Japanized. At least it would be giving his children a chance to live a better life. When it comes down to a question of survival or death, human nature and the history of evolution provide evidence that the obvious choice is to strive for existence.

But again, not everyone was aware of this situation. Halmöni didn't know that Korea was a Japanese colony until she entered common school. "When I was little, I didn't know what nationalism was. I didn't know what treason was either. To me, there had always been Japanese living in Korea; they were there before I was born. My parents never told me anything regarding the nation.

"The first to be aware of nationalism and the inequality among the Koreans and Japanese were people living in the big cities – cities like Taegu, Seoul and Pyongyang. These were the first places to have independence movements. American missionaries first entered these big cities and educated the youth, telling them about the cruelties and discrimination taking place and encouraged the Koreans to fight back." These missionaries established many schools that are now prominent universities in Korea.

With pride in her voice, Halmöni then proceeds to recite the names of missionary schools that became universities: "There were many American and Canadian missionaries who said they came from far-away places called North and South America. These good people founded many schools in our country. They founded the Kyesöng Boys High School and Sinmyöng High School. The only nationally recognized schools were the Kyöngbuk Boys' High School and Kyöngbuk

Girls' High School. Present-day Seoul's Yŏnsei University used to be the Yŏnhui Technical School, and Ehwa Women's University used to be called the Ehwa Academy (*hakdang* 學堂). Also, Bosŏng Technical School is supposedly today's Koryŏ University. The Japanese didn't allow Koreans to have universities, so we called them technical schools instead."

Many other universities and hospitals were established by the missionaries, but most were eventually closed because they encouraged national spirit and instituted native language education which hindered the Japanese goal of total cultural assimilation.²⁹

Foreigners

Although Ŭisŏng County was relatively rural, there were many foreigners residing in the area. This is most likely because Ŭisŏng County is approximately 50 kilometers from Taegu, a major regional market city, which drew thousands of merchants from all over Korea.³⁰ There were many Chinese merchants and laborers in Halmŏni's village, and the Koreans found the Chinese people very curious. Most of the Chinese merchants in Korea were there to sell silk, as Chinese silk was considered the best in the world. Halmŏni giggles and begins to sing a song she and her friends used to sing when they were children. The song is about a certain Mr. Wang from China and how he conducted his silk business: "*The man who does business with silk, Mr. Wang. Silk! Silk!*"

²⁹ Lee, "The Establishment of Modern Universities in Korea and Their Implications for Korean Education Policies."

³⁰ Duus, The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910 332.

There were also Chinese laborers who came to Korea to find work.

Halmöni's village was constructing a church, so they hired Chinese workers.

“Üisöng County employed Chinese builders to construct the church. At the time, the Japanese didn't care whether or not there were Chinese people in Korea. The Chinese workers were such strange people; they were always very dirty-looking, as if they hadn't washed themselves for months. We teased them, calling them *Jjang-ko-la* because that's what it sounded like when they talked to each other. When the villagers went to visit the construction site to see how much of the church was done and also to stare at the Chinese workers. They yelled at us in their strangely accented Korean, ‘Pay money to watch! Pay money or go!’”

There were also Japanese businessmen, law enforcement officers, and immigrants. According to Peter Duus in *The Abacus and the Sword*:

The Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910... [was] the result of two separate but interlinked processes, one political, the other economic. The political process entailed the gradual extension of influence and control over the Korean state by the Meiji leadership; the economic process entailed the gradual penetration of the Korean market by an anonymous army of Japanese traders, sojourners, and settlers.³¹

Even before 1910, there were many Japanese settling and living in Korea, slowly influencing the people politically and economically. Evidently, the “penetration of the Korean market” extended even into the countryside without rousing much suspicion from the locals. Despite records of popular uprisings and various forms of social resistance against the Japanese before 1905, Halmöni does not have any memories of the Japanese being in conflict with the Korean villagers.³² Perhaps

³¹ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* 23.

³² “Anti-Japanese sentiment often sprang from friction between the local population and Japanese settlers, who flooded into the country during and after the [1905] Russo-Japanese War” (Ibid.)

because Ŭisŏng was in the countryside, no one really had time to think about the political situation and harbor grudges against the Japanese for colonizing Korea. Nothing had really changed, except that there were more Japanese people living in their neighborhoods, and there were more Japanese policemen walking around. In fact, the Japanese and the Koreans there remained on peaceful terms until the 1930s.

“No one accused [people employed by Japanese] of collaborating with the enemy. Things were very peaceful when I was growing up. Even though there were Japanese policemen around, they didn’t bother us at all,” says Halmŏni when I ask her if Koreans were despised by other Koreans for working in Japanese companies.

“No one really cared. It was just another way to earn money. My elder *Oppa* and his friends had Japanese friends. They even went to the police station to engage in friendly judo or kendo matches with the young Japanese officers. The Japanese were everywhere; they were government authorities, police officers, school teachers... I never questioned why this was. Some of our neighbors were Japanese, and we were all playmates, so it seemed natural that the Japanese were in Korea. It was only when World War II started that the Korean-Japanese relationship turned sour.”

However, cultural dissimilarities made some conflict inevitable. According to Duus, “The Japanese brought with them customs and practices offensive to the sensibilities of the ordinary Koreans. The relative visibility of Japanese women, for example, shocked many Koreans, who regarded their behavior as lascivious.”³³

Likewise, Halmŏni tells me that the villagers were often scandalized by the dress and

³³ Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* 221.

acts of Japanese women and Japanese men who walked around almost naked in the summer.

“The Japanese women didn’t wear underwear. They had nothing under their kimono folds. They wrapped a sheet of cloth around their bodies just as you wrap a towel around you when you get out of the shower. Then they put on the kimono so tightly that they could only take tiny steps,” Halmöni does an impression of the Japanese women she saw near her house. She draws her shoulders in, covers her mouth with her hand, hunches over slightly and sways her body as she takes tiny steps on our kitchen floor.

“Oh Lord! The funniest thing was that they relieved themselves standing up like men! People whispered about how lewd Japanese women were, with their voices as tiny as their steps, and no underwear! The men were downright offensive in the summer. They tied some sort of rubber band around their naked waist and slung a piece of linen from the front to back, barely hiding their privates and walked out in the public, just like that! The village elders were disgusted and muttered, ‘Those bastards,’ every time they saw a Japanese man walking around in a loin cloth.”

She continues to tell me that the Japanese are very shrewd people: “Since long ago, the Japanese realized that the Korean peninsula is a strategically important territory that connects the Japanese archipelago to the rest of the Asian continent. As long as they have Korea in their grip, they can easily reach China and spread their influence beyond Asia, into the Soviets’ land, even into Europe.”

However, one cannot blame another for being quick witted and having had good timing. Korea was corrupt and vulnerable; Japan took over and reformed a pathetic nation and (unintentionally) imparted a legacy of fervent nationalism.

Christianity and Missionaries – A Brief History

Christianity is one of the most popular religions in Korea. More than 25 percent of the population of South Korea is Protestant Christian and churches can be seen everywhere: “The capital, Seoul, is filled with church buildings and signs of the cross, and has been called ‘a city of churches.’”³⁴ According to a Korean newspaper, *Chung’ang ilbo*, in 1994, five of the ten largest Protestant churches in the world are in Korea.³⁵ It is quite amazing how a foreign religion has become so popular in this tiny Asian country in such a short period of time. The story of its rise is inextricably connected to my own family history.

A century after the arrival of Catholicism in the Korean peninsula, Protestantism rapidly spread across the country.³⁶ Unlike Catholicism, which was severely persecuted and suppressed, Protestantism was warmly received and earned the court’s recognition. The missionaries were respected by the people³⁷ because they

³⁴ Chung-shin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) 4.

³⁵ "February 25, 1994," *Chung’ang ilbo* [Central Daily News] (Chicago version): 4.

³⁶ From 1784 to 1884 C.E. is dubbed “The century of Roman Catholic missions” and is characterized by missions to penetrate the Hermit Kingdom and the consequential persecutions and martyrdoms. (Samuel Hugh Moffett, *The Christians of Korea* (New York: Friendship Press, Inc., 1962) 33.)

³⁷ Andrew Eungi Kim, "Political Insecurity, Social Chaos, Religious Void and the Rise of Protestantism in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea," *Social History* 26.3 (2001): 268.

had “sufficient material and human resources.”³⁸ One of the major events in the history of Korean Protestantism that indirectly aided in winning the confidence of the Hermit Kingdom court and people was a violent insurgency in the winter of 1884. Numerous royal councilors were murdered and the Queen’s nephew was injured. Horace Allen, the physician at the American legation and one of the first resident Protestant missionaries to Korea, saved the prince and was appointed as physician to the royal court by the grateful king. The king gave his approval for Allen to build a hospital in the capital as a cooperative project between America and Korea, which was essentially the first official approval by the Korean government of missionary work in Korea.³⁹

Initially, the widespread acceptance of Christianity was not for religious reasons, but for social and political reasons. Wherever the missionaries went, they built schools, drugstores, hospitals, and newspapers and taught the Koreans not only to believe in God, but also to protect their own interests.⁴⁰ The common people felt aggrieved because of the government’s oppressive policies and official corruption:

Centuries of inefficient bureaucracy, widespread corruption, acute poverty and oppressive officialdom further made the lives of the common people miserable to the extreme. In a typical social reaction to dire socio-political circumstances and protracted ‘hard times,’ large numbers of Koreans embraced a new value system offering them hope and a way out of their misery.⁴¹

³⁸ Kyōng-no Yun, "The Relationship between Korean Catholics and Protestants," trans. Sun-ja Yi, Korea and Christianity: Studies in Korean Religions and Culture, eds. Yee-Heum Yoon, Lewis R. Lancaster and Chai-Shin Yu (Seoul: Korean Scholar Press, 1996) 32.

³⁹ Moffett, The Christians of Korea 36-37.

⁴⁰ Mahn-yōl Yi, "The Birth of the National Spirit of the Christians," Korea and Christianity: Studies in Korean Religions and Culture, ed. Chai-Shin Yu, vol. 8 (Seoul: Korean Scholar Press, 1996) 44.

⁴¹ Kim, "Political Insecurity, Social Chaos, Religious Void and the Rise of Protestantism in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea," 268.

Also, some government officials began to notice that “the Christian countries in the West were civilized and wealthy.”⁴² Koreans, aware of these social and political problems, actively promoted Christianity, matching the efforts of the foreign missionaries to spread the religion. According to Samuel Hugh Moffett (a theology professor in Korea during the mid to late 1900s), “It was medicine, not preaching, that opened Korea to the Protestant church. It was education, not evangelism that first commended it to the authorities.”⁴³ Furthermore, the Protestant Church’s attitude towards the Koreans attracted many followers; (in theory) there was no social class system in Christianity. For the first time, people were not discriminated against and treated differently according to their social status as Yangban, Commoner, or Chŏnmin. Everyone, men *and women*, were encouraged to become educated, as “human beings are the most noble of [God’s] creations.” The missionaries emphasized human rights and gender equality and that “nobility lies in one’s consciousness and study,” not in what society consigned to you at birth.⁴⁴

It was during the late nineteenth century, when Christianity was rapidly spreading in Korea, that Halmŏni’s grandparents became believers. Around the time their first child was born (in 1894), the Gospel was preached for the first time in Ŭisŏng County by an old scholar who had been converted in the north. As mentioned above, Korean Christianity was spread not only by traveling missionaries, but also by Korean converts: “Korean Christians, it has been observed, have always been one jump ahead of the missionaries... [Korean converts] began winning their own

⁴² Kim, "Political Insecurity, Social Chaos, Religious Void and the Rise of Protestantism in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea," 40.

⁴³ Moffett, The Christians of Korea 122-23.

⁴⁴ Chosŏn Christian Bulletin February 1897.

converts before any missionary was able to take up permanent work in their forbidden land.”⁴⁵

The first time Halmöni saw a Western missionary was when she was a child. Her grandfather and her father had never seen a foreigner in Ŭisöng before that – they did not come in direct contact with Westerners until a few decades later: “The Gospel was preached by Koreans who had been converted by foreign missionaries up north. The Christian capital at the time was in Pyongyang,⁴⁶ that is where the only seminary was for a long time. My Haraböji (grandfather) told me that the preachers all wore traditional robes with tall black hats (*gat*), read from a book called the *Söngkyöng*⁴⁷ and told the villagers about someone named Jesus Christ who loved us so much that he sacrificed his life to save us.”

Much of Korean Christianity was self-supporting; the Gospel was spread by word of mouth. When there were enough believers, they would raise money and erect churches, independent of the foreign missionaries’ work. In contrast, Catholicism was strictly regulated by the missionaries and the Vatican, and as a result was less successful in converting the Koreans:

Entrusted with the responsibility of spreading the gospel, Korean Christians themselves were financially responsible for building their own churches and for supporting their ministers and missionaries. Accordingly, the early Korean Protestants themselves built and maintained their churches, established missions, formed study classes, pioneered new regions for evangelism, instructed new converts, preached to the sick and ministered to the needy.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Moffett, *The Christians of Korea* 36.

⁴⁶ “...Rev. S. A. Moffett [father of Samuel Hugh Moffett] moved into Pyongyang in 1893, becoming the first resident Protestant missionary in the forbidden interior...[Pyongyang] was for a time to become the largest Presbyterian mission station in the world,” (Ibid., p. 41-42).

⁴⁷ 聖經 – literally “holy doctrine” referring to the Bible.

⁴⁸ Kim, "Political Insecurity, Social Chaos, Religious Void and the Rise of Protestantism in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea," 278.

Halmöni recalls that the Ŭisöng church was constructed independently, “Around the time I was born, the Protestants in my village constructed a brick church in Ŭisöng County.”

Clasping her hands together, Halmöni sighs, recalling and admiring the image of the church that remains only in her memory, “Oh! *Nömu arümdawatji!* It was so beautiful! Brick buildings were very rare, so everyone was extremely proud of our beautiful church. That church founded one of the first Christian kindergartens in Korea. All of my siblings except my *Oppa* enrolled in the church kindergarten. Everything was run by Koreans. I’m sure there were foreign missionaries in contact with the elders of the church, but when I was little, I did not see any.”

By the time Halmöni was in primary school, there were more American missionaries visiting her village: “The American missionaries visited Ŭisöng and preached, ‘*Yesu! Gee-jus!*’ They taught us English hymns, singing ‘Yes, Jesus loves me...’ – children’s songs.”

The frequency of verbal mishaps between the missionaries and the Korean natives were numerous. Fortunately, the comedy of these awkward, yet humorous situations helped break down the cultural barriers and social unease between the two parties. I ask Halmöni if she has any funny anecdotes. She stops to think and suddenly bursts out laughing. When Halmöni tells me what she is laughing at, I cannot help but join in laughter.

“It was so hilarious for us to listen to the missionaries when they spoke Korean. The poor Americans had stiff curved tongues that sang out their L’s and R’s with such ease, but had so much trouble pronouncing our Ö’s and sharply rolled

Rhee-ül's, which is something between their L's and R's. For example, millet is *jo* in Korean. In the fall, whole fields of millet swayed in the wind. One missionary found this particularly beautiful and moving, so she cautiously said, '*Jo... jo-seed... sway. This way, that way. This way, that way.*' All the villagers fell down laughing when they heard this. 'Seed' in Korean is *ssi*. Therefore 'millet seed' is literally translated as *jo-ssi*. However, no Korean says *jo-ssi* because it sounds too similar to *jot*, which is the word for the male genitalia. The poor woman didn't know this and ended up saying, 'The penis is swaying in the wind. This way, that way. This way, that way.'"

Many of the new Christian converts were diligent believers, but they were ignorant farmers who did not know how to utilize the information they were being told. Subsequently, miscommunication occurred not only in language, but also in the exchange of ideas. Halmöni's mother told Halmöni of one such innocent misunderstanding:

There was an old neighbor who diligently worshipped God. She was an ignorant woman. She worshipped God in the old pagan way, like one would bow to the mountain god or Buddha. She woke up early every morning and sat in her front yard, rubbing her hands together in prayer with a bowl of cold water placed in front of her big, clay soy bean paste jars. She never missed Sunday services.

One day, the church minister approached her and said it was time for her baptism. He told her that six months prior to the baptism, she would be questioned by the minister to test her knowledge about the Bible.

Worried, the old lady asked her daughter-in-law, "Dear, I'm so worried that I might fail the Bible test."

"Mother," the daughter-in-law replied. "If the minister asks, 'Did Jesus die on the cross?' then you must answer, 'Yes, He did.' If he asks, 'Why did He die?' then you must answer, 'Because of my sins, Jesus died on the cross.'"

A few weeks later, the old woman went to see the minister. Half way through, he asked her the question that her daughter-in-law coached her on, "Sister, did Jesus die on the cross?"

“Yes, Jesus died on the cross.”

“Sister, why did Jesus die on the cross?”

Confidently, the old woman answered, “Why, Jesus died on the cross because of my daughter-in-law’s sins!”

As demonstrated in the preceding exchange between the old woman, her daughter-in-law, and the minister, Koreans did not know what “believing in Christ” really was. They understood that worshipping God was showing their devotion by bowing their heads in prayer and never missing a Sunday worship service. Halmõni tells me that even though many people could not read, they had heard the songs and the Bible passages so many times that they memorized the chorus and mumbled the rest of the hymn or passage that they could not commit to memory.

Women in Christianity

When the church was erected, the number of converts increased. The church was not only a religious venue. It was a place where men, women, and children could better their lives through education and dream of a better future. Most importantly, women were taught how to read and write their own language. Before Christianity was introduced, it was considered useless, and even inauspicious, to teach women beyond the duties of motherhood and housekeeping. With the exception of the King’s consorts and some upper-class women, literacy in women was strongly discouraged. What is the use of educating a woman if she is bound to the private domains? Following the example of women in Confucian China, Korean women were not allowed to go out in public alone:

At the bottom of the strict social hierarchy were Korean women who, until the turn of the century, received no education and were in virtual bondage throughout their lives to their fathers before marriage, to their husbands after marriage and to their sons in old age... Denied any socially meaningful status and role, women's activities were mostly restricted to the home....⁴⁹

The only exceptions were the *Ki-saeng*, or the female entertainers. The *ki-saeng* were educated women whose main clients were the Yangban. In order to be able to converse with their aristocratic patrons, the women were trained in music, dance, art, social manners, and literature.⁵⁰ It is important to note that the *ki-saeng* were not common prostitutes (*ch'ang-nyō*):

[The *ki-saeng*] were economically independent and secure. Their clothing was of the finest cloth and silk. They adorned themselves with gems and they could sing and dance as they pleased... Furthermore, *ki-saeng* could freely associate with men, irrespective of stern injunctions forbidding association with members of the opposite sex outside the covenant of marriage. No other women of the Chosŏn period could even dream of this freedom. Being relatively unconstrained by the suffocating Confucian norms encumbering women of all other social classes, *ki-saeng* were relatively free to express their private feelings and individual experiences in unique and creative ways.⁵¹

Although they sometimes had sexual relations with the patrons whom they served, these women did not submit to just anyone. Furthermore, despite their lowly social origin, the *ki-saeng* were respected by the commoners, and in special cases (such as the celebrated *ki-saeng* Huang Jin-yi) they were even respected by the aristocrats:

“Due to their artistic talents and intellectual qualification [the *ki-saeng*] were treated

⁴⁹ Kim, "Political Insecurity, Social Chaos, Religious Void and the Rise of Protestantism in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea," 270.

⁵⁰ Sung-Won Cho, "Renaissance Nuns Vs. Korean Gisaeng: Chastity and Female Celibacy in Measure for Measure and 'Chun-Hyang Jeon'," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.4 (2004): 566.

⁵¹ Young-Hee Lee, "Reviewed Work: Song of the Kisaeng: Courtesan Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty. By Young-Hee Lee. Transl. By Constantine Contogenis; Wolhee Choe," *Pacific Affairs* 71.2 (1998): 266.

differently from other ordinary prostitutes and enjoyed, in some special cases, a relatively high social respect.”⁵²

When I asked Halmöni what people in her county thought about the ki-saeng, whether they were frowned upon as prostitutes or respected as artists, she responded, “None of us commoners could dare criticize a ki-saeng! The ki-saeng were more skilled than men and were the most beautiful, intelligent group of women, despite the fact that they were entertainers and low-class by birth. Not just anyone could approach them. Some of the ki-saeng even got into politics and took part in the government through their patrons. These women served not only as entertainers, but also as fellow scholars and conversation partners from whom these men could get advice. Many girls from low-class families wanted to become ki-saeng, because they were powerful and rich. For example, the Ŭisöng County ki-saeng were so wealthy that they organized and fully funded the construction of the brick church in Ŭisöng.”

The fact that these women, who in Western society would have been looked down upon as morally depraved, founded a church struck me as ironic and extremely fascinating. But to Halmöni, this wasn’t surprising at all. Instead of focusing on this paradoxical incidence of Christian ki-saeng, she prides herself in how big and important her county was: “There were eight ki-saeng in town. Not many towns were big enough to support ki-saeng, but Ŭisöng was wealthy enough to have eight! The governor lived in my town, too. He lived in a big mansion in the center of town with a spacious front yard that served as the legal court ‘room.’”

⁵² Cho, "Renaissance Nuns Vs. Korean Gisaeng: Chastity and Female Celibacy in Measure for Measure and 'Chun-Hyang Jeon'," 567.

Only when urged to continue the story about the ki-saeng, does Halmõni go on, “Out of the eight ki-saeng, only one was Buddhist; the rest were Christians. Every Sunday they traveled 20-30 *li*⁵³ to a small village called Bi-jõng, where they would listen to sermons. Since ki-saeng were well-educated and literate, they read Bible translations and accepted Christianity quickly. They resolved to pool their life-savings and donate it to the church construction fund.”

Christianity appealed to many people who were dissatisfied with the class structure and society as a whole. Perhaps this is why the ki-saeng converted to Christianity – especially because of the preaching that Jesus came for sinners and outcasts: “Jesus said, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the [self-proclaimed] righteous, but sinners.”⁵⁴

Christianity represented a freedom and equality that women had not enjoyed since the Koryõ dynasty⁵⁵ before the introduction of Confucianism. Korean converts recognized that “men and women are sons and daughters of God on equal terms” and “induced [women] to attend church services and to engage in acts of worship along with men,” though they sat separately from the men inside the church.⁵⁶ At home, women were respected. Husbands taught their wives how to read and write *Han ’gũl*: “[The *Han ’gũl*-only policy adopted by the Christians] enabled women to read the Bible... Husbands also taught their wives *Han ’gũl* at home....”⁵⁷ Halmõni’s own

⁵³ Approximately 9 miles.

⁵⁴ Matthew 9:10-12 NIV.

⁵⁵ Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁵⁶ Yi, "The Benefits Which Christianity Has Conferred on Korea," 34.

⁵⁷ Yi, "The Birth of the National Spirit of the Christians," 48.

mother was taught by her husband: “Abōji taught Ōmōni how to read and write *Han’gŭl* so that she could read the Bible and sing the hymns.”

Because her grandfather and father were open to the idea of educating the women in their family, they sent Halmōni and her sisters to school. However, since they lived in the countryside, there was no other way to get a higher education than to go to a bigger city like Taegu. Accordingly, after Halmōni graduated from primary school, she went to Taegu to get tutored for the Sinmyōng Women’s School entrance exam. Unfortunately, a hail storm devastated the vegetable fields that year. Halmōni’s father couldn’t continue paying for her tutorial after the storm ruined his crops, so she gave up studying for the exam. Before long, a family friend who was the director in the Christian Dongsan Hospital, in Taegu, which was run by American missionaries, offered Halmōni a position as a nurse. She would be trained in medicine and could also find time to enroll in a music school. However, her father had reservations about sending his daughter so far away, so he got her a job at a Christian kindergarten near Ŭisōng instead.

“‘It would be a different matter if you were a son, but it is easy for bad things to happen to a daughter that is sent far away from her home and her parents,’ Abōji told me. Because I was not allowed to go to Taegu, Abōji found a nationally recognized Christian kindergarten that was nearby. The principal of the school was Elder Oh Ha-su. He was a bright and deeply religious man. He was wealthy and his three sons all graduated from Seoul Technical School. Elder Oh offered my parents the opportunity for me to work as a class monitor.

“From then on, I worked with the children and learned how to play the piano when I had free time. Until the Japanese police closed them down, the churches were always open, welcoming everyone; the kindergarten was open to the public, too. Families that did not believe in God also sent their children to this kindergarten because it was the only one in our county. Later, this kindergarten grew and became a professional child care technical school in what is today’s Chung-ang University.”

Halmõni eventually became the headmistress of the kindergarten when the previous headmistress married and left. Halmõni worked at the kindergarten until she got married. She proudly describes her modern haircut and outfit, “As the principal of the kindergarten, they told me I couldn’t keep my hair in a long braid (signifying I was still a young girl). I had to cut my hair in the new ‘Western’ fashion and fix it so that I looked like an older, married woman. My shoes were specially ordered from Seoul and my work clothes were so nice, made of good quality cotton.”

Through Halmõni’s story, one can see that relatively wealthy families encouraged their daughters to become educated. She was free to travel all the way to Taegu by herself to further her scholarship. She was a working woman, too; she worked as the headmistress of a mission school. Halmõni was far from the stereotypical Asian woman, confined to the home, uneducated and bound by Confucian values and traditions. All this, Halmõni says, is thanks to Christianity and the enlightenment that her parents gained from the foreign missionaries.

Shinto Worship and Christian Persecution

Initially, the Japanese government did not feel that religious teaching was a threat to their control over the Koreans. Therefore, Christianity was allowed to freely and quickly spread throughout the peninsula via schools, youth organizations (i.e., Y.M.C.A), and traveling missionaries. However, when the Japanese authorities became aware of the nationalistic nature of the religious gatherings, they felt compelled to protect their governmental authority.⁵⁸ Beginning in 1932, Christian schools were closed down and instead, State Shinto ceremonies were enforced in all public schools.

State Shinto ideology was used to defend the Japanese military expansion and facilitate the assimilation or “Japanization” of the Korean people. The loyalty and devotion of the Koreans were especially crucial after the addition of Manchuria to the Japanese empire: “The establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932 by Japanese expansionist authorities placed Korea in a significantly new position in the areas of communication, economy and defense of the Japanese Empire.”⁵⁹ Japan needed more soldiers to defend their newly gained “nonreligious,” political expression of patriotism. Religious or not, it was clearly an attempt by the authorities to embed Japanese cultural and political ideology into the minds of the young impressionable Koreans and convince them to volunteer for the Imperial Army.

⁵⁸ Yang-sŏn Kim, "Compulsory Shinto Shrine Worship and Persecution," trans. Sin-hong Chŏng, *Korea and Christianity: Studies in Korean Religions and Culture*, ed. Chai-shin Yu, vol. 8 (Seoul: Korean Scholar Press, 1996) 87.

⁵⁹ Kim, "The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christianity under Japanese Colonialism," 503. By 1937 laborers were drafted, in addition to military conscriptions. (Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) 176.)

Halmõni remembers being led out to the school yard to “celebrate” Japan’s victory: “When the [Pacific War] started, I was in primary school. Every so often, we would receive news of the Japanese victory in China. We would hear from our teachers, ‘Japan has successfully captured Hong Kong!’ and the entire school would be required to line up in the athletic field, throw up our arms and yell ‘*Manse! Long live!*’ on the top of our lungs. None of us knew why we were celebrating. We just did as we were told.

“The situation in Korea worsened as the war raged on,” Halmõni continues, describing how Shinto worship became a more serious matter. “The Japanese authorities had a policy of *Naesõn Ilch’e* (內鮮一體), meaning ‘Korea and Japan are one entity.’ They built Shinto shrines not only in schools and public venues, but also in every church. Everyone from school children to the town hall employees was told to bow down to the east before the Japanese emperor and some demonic spirit called Amaterasu.⁶⁰ [This policy] was especially harsh on the Christians – we were taught that there was only one god and to bow down to another god was a sin. Nobody wanted to go to hell.

“At first, we didn’t participate in the worship. But gradually, the Japanese soldiers began to arrest those who refused to attend the Shinto worship. They tortured the Christians and forced them to pour ink over the Bible. They took the Bible and told the Christians to spit and piss on the pages. They painted over the words with black ink so we wouldn’t be able to read the scripture anymore. People got scared and fell down in front of the shrines, not daring to lift their heads.”

⁶⁰ Amaterasu is a Japanese sun goddess. This ceremony was named *Tongbang yobae* (東方遙拜). (Kim, "The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christianity under Japanese Colonialism," 504.)

Halmõni shakes her head in disappointment, “One of our town ministers who returned from these torture sessions was so frightened that as soon as he heard footsteps outside of the church he stopped in the middle of his sermon and nervously mumbled, ‘Let us end today with The Lord’s Prayer.’ Then he quickly left the church and hid in his house. One by one, the American missionaries were sent back to America. After the missionaries left, believers started congregating in mountains and riversides, despite the threats. One winter, in a neighboring town, the police cracked the frozen river and threw buckets of ice water on a group of hiding Christians. I believe some of them are still alive to this day.”

Halmõni has her own theory regarding the closure of religious schools and the subsequent persecution of Christians. She believes that the local law enforcement officers realized the growing awareness of social justice and insistence on individual freedom among the converts was jeopardizing their control over the people.⁶¹ But to her, the most disgraceful part of this incident was the Korean police who betrayed their own countrymen.

“The Japanese authorities didn’t know anything,” she grunted. “It was the Korean police that heard us complaining about the Japanese rule and saw the young men and women gather at their youth organizations learning about how the Japanese government wronged Korea and were encouraged to study abroad and return to their homeland as freedom fighters. They heard all of this and still betrayed us.”

Korea scholar Bruce Cumings’ studies about the colonial period concurs with Halmõni’s description:

⁶¹ Yi, "The Birth of the National Spirit of the Christians," 48-49.

Koreans could no longer blame just the foreign race for the misfortunes that befell them, since the regime often presented itself in the person of a Korean official... Some 40 to 50 percent of the National Police were Korean, and Koreans were even used fairly widely as police in Manchukuo, where they acquired an especially bad name for brutality and venality.⁶²

Halmöni is so embittered by these Korean police that she still remembers the names of the Korean officers that arrested one of Korea's most famous ministers, Reverend Chu Ki-ch'öl. She spits out their names as if they were curse words: "Officers Bae and Mun of the Ŭisöng Police Station arrested Reverend Chu and tortured him for refusing to worship before the Shinto shrine. These two cowards shamed and defiled our county's name. They nailed up a wooden board, flipped it over, and forced him to walk on top of the sharp, protruding nails. People who were watching in horror came back to the village and told us that Reverend Chu sang the hymn, "The Bright Heavenly Way" as three Korean officers watched the nails pierce through his feet." I can't help but cringe, listening to all the horrible ways that the Christians were tortured and martyred.

Halmöni's older brother was one of the persecuted Christians. Halmöni proudly describes how religious and talented he was: "Oppa often preached at his church youth group meetings. He sang beautifully in the choir. He also played the violin and clarinet well. In school, he was always the top of his class." Halmöni's smile falters and her voice is no longer animated, "He had just gotten married when we heard that the police were arresting young men who were 'threats' to the peace of the nation." These were the youth who refused to bow before the Shinto shrines and harbored (Korean) nationalistic, Anti-Japanese sentiments. Many of them were

⁶² Cumings, Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History 178.

forced to flee political and religious persecution by going to Manchuria. However, political and religious exiles were not the only ones going abroad.

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, abundant natural resources and available farmland in Northeast China motivated many peasants to look for work in Manchukuo:⁶³ “A large majority of Koreans went to China to avoid hardship at home and to seek new economic opportunities on the bustling Manchurian frontier. Others were recruited by Japanese government agencies and industrial organizations in China.”⁶⁴ Korea had been annexed as part of the Japanese Empire and was under the complete control of the Japanese government. On the other hand, the government of Manchukuo had nominal independence and was able to guarantee racial equality for Korean migrants under the Manchukuo declaration of independence:

We hereby declare the establishment of Manchukuo, and its separation from China, with the will of 30 million people...[and] there should be no differences among all those who live within this new territory. In addition to Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Japanese, and Koreans, people of any other nationality will be treated equally with others, as long as they wish to reside permanently in Manchukuo.⁶⁵

Because the colonizer-colonized binary was nominally absent in Manchukuo, those who could no longer endure the racial discrimination and political persecution in Korea considered Manchukuo a haven: “Although many Koreans migrated to

⁶³Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* 176. There were also Korean laborers who were treated as human capital and forced to migrate under the Japanese National General Mobilization Law.

⁶⁴Edward Taehan Chang, "Korean Migration to Northeast China (Manchuria) 1869-1945; the Resistance against Japanese Colonialism," *Koreans & Korean-Americans Studies Bulletin* 12.1 (2001): 48.

⁶⁵Mariko Asano Tamanoi, "Knowledge, Power, and Racial Classification: The 'Japanese' in 'Manchuria,'" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59.2 (2000): 252.

Manchuria in order to better themselves economically, others sought refuge from oppressive Japanese policies in their homeland.”⁶⁶

Two men in Halmöni’s life migrated to Manchukuo, though for different reasons. Her brother fled from religious persecution: “Oppa was in trouble with the Japanese police for not participating in the Shinto worship. Aböji realized that Oppa was in danger of being imprisoned and tortured, so he started thinking of ways to send Oppa away from Korea. One day Aböji came home and said that fishing had gone very well and he had enough carps to make fish soup for our entire village. He had Ömöni (Mother) brew a rich soup of the carps he had caught and sent them to our neighbors. That was Aböji’s way of throwing his son a farewell party. That evening Aböji told Oppa to get ready for a long journey to Manchuria, where he would not be persecuted by the police. Oppa left us that night for Manchuria.”

Halmöni sighs, “My sister-in-law couldn’t go with him. Aböji said that the police would be too suspicious if Oppa and his wife both left the village. I felt bad for them; they had only been married a few months when this happened. But there was no other way. Aböji warned Oppa not to write any letters home; if the letter fell into the wrong hands, the police would know where he was hiding.”

Halmöni stops and looks down into the empty teacup. A pained expression shadows her usually serene face. Perhaps she is thinking back to the day when she learned that she might never see her brother again. She was very close to him; he had been her role model. This was the first time her life was directly affected by the repressive policies Japan had implemented. I think about what it must have been like

⁶⁶ Chang, "Korean Migration to Northeast China (Manchuria) 1869-1945; the Resistance against Japanese Colonialism," 46.

to have her family torn apart, the first in a series of changes that would throw her life into chaos for the next ten years.

I can tell that remembering those moments is hard on Halmöni. She gets up from her seat, takes the two teacups to the sink and begins to wash them. After she finishes drying the cups and putting them back in the cupboard, she sits back down and resumes her story. “While in Manchuria, my Oppa met an old childhood friend, Kim Sung-woon, who had disappeared years earlier.⁶⁷ Having come from a poor peasant family, he had gone to Manchuria in search of economic advantage. I met him a few times when he came over to our house with Oppa after school. My parents would often urge him to stay for dinner, knowing that if he went home he would probably go to sleep on an empty stomach.

“Sung-woon *ssi* was Oppa’s classmate. He was very smart, but because his family was very poor, they could not support his education. The school fee was only a few cents, but his parents would rather spend it on tobacco or a cup of rice. He got kicked out of school so many times that he eventually resorted to sitting under the window and eavesdropping on the lecture. After classes, Oppa and his friends gave him their notes so he could keep up with his work. Oppa also gave him some of his own school supplies; pencils, brushes, rice paper, and art paper. Also, knowing that Sung-woon *ssi* would never accept their money, they sent him on small errands and paid his tuition for him. Sung-woon *ssi* was always thankful to Oppa and Aböji, but he was always too embarrassed to openly thank them. Besides, we didn’t expect anything from him – everyone in my family loved him like their own son.”

⁶⁷ Kim Sung-woon is referred to as Sung-woon *ssi* by Halmöni. The *ssi* (씨 氏) used after his name is not the same *ssi* used previously, meaning seed. It is a suffix meaning Mr., Miss, or Mrs.

It is funny to hear Halmőni talk about the boy who grew up to become her husband, and later my grandfather. I met my grandfather only a few times before he passed away in the summer of 2006. I came to assume that Halmőni's marriage to Kim Sung-woon was a miserable, loveless one; her parents must have arranged it against her will, which was common in Korean families. However, I was very surprised to learn that Halmőni had been keeping her sweet love story with Kim Sung-woon to herself, or maybe no one bothered to ask her.

Once, when I was younger, my grandfather came to America to visit us. Unlike the other two times he visited, he was alone. Usually, my Japanese grandmother, Obāchan would accompany him. She could not stand seeing my grandfather and Halmőni alone, together. On this rare occasion, Halmőni had my grandfather all to herself. I caught glimpses of Halmőni sitting next to my grandfather, stroking his hand, touching his ear, or gazing at his face, fully content with just his presence. A few years ago, Halmőni had mentioned to me that her one wish was to take a morning stroll holding hands with my grandfather, as she had seen other elderly couples do around our neighborhood. At the time, I was too young to understand that this was Halmőni yearning for her husband. But now I can tell from Halmőni's shy smile, the way she twists her hands like an anxious school girl, and the eager tone of voice in which she describes Kim Sung-woon in his youth that she still treasures the timid, all too brief love that fate allowed them to share.

Chapter Two

I am reading Halmöni's story. My eyes are sore, my brain more so. After fifteen years of American education, I am accustomed to the linear alphabet of the English language. Korean letters look like little black clusters of geometric shapes and lines, each representing one syllable that the brain must register all at once before tackling the next cluster. On the rare occasions that I do read Korean, they are bilingual medical insurance brochures that come in the mail with big, bold typed letters or elementary-level novels I read over the summer if I am suddenly motivated to brush up on my language skills.

Halmöni's handwriting is more difficult to read. The letters look aggressive, jerky. The circles look more like squares, the squares like triangles. The characters stretch out, with no regard for the boundary lines on the page. There is no punctuation, no paragraphical indentation to indicate stops, pauses, or the introduction of new thoughts; everything is in one breath. This does not look as if it had been written by the delicate hands of the timid woman I thought she was. To the trained, aesthetically appreciative eyes, Halmöni's writing is beautifully calligraphic. But to me, a stranger to her culture, it is simply messy.

I suddenly think back to when I was studying abroad in China. I am at a museum, looking at a display of great Chinese leaders' handwritten letters from the time of the Long March. Standing in front of the display case, looking disinterestedly at Mao Zedong's letter, I am a confused foreigner, secretly wondering what all the

buzz over these letters is about. So they're old documents. It's like visiting Mt. Vernon and seeing a glass-framed letter that George Washington wrote to his wife hanging on the wall of his library. I overhear someone nearby saying with pride that Chairman Mao's greatness, strength of will, and bravery shows in his calligraphy. We are both looking at the same letter, but we are not seeing the same thing. How can this man deduce so much about Mao's character just by looking at a letter? He goes on about how the thicker lines are suggestive of the speed and pressure applied to the brush, and I begin to see what he sees. Zhou Enlai's letter is more delicate and legible, wholly different from Mao's irregular, yet bold creation.

Comparing Mao and Zhou to Halmöni may seem ridiculous, but it gets me thinking. What does it mean – the obvious disparity between Halmöni's serene, reserved nature and the surprisingly assertive, almost frantic characters on the pages before me? Is the person I've known all my life just a façade? I find myself wanting to know more; I want to transcend the child-guardian relationship and begin to understand the woman that is Park Jong-soo.

Marriage

When Kim Sung-woon, your Haraböji [grandfather], came to my house, he loved me. I was much younger than him and didn't know what love was. Behind our house grew three jujube trees. Every autumn, the owner of the jujube trees collected their fruit and brought a bowl of jujubes to our house. Sometimes Sung-woon ssi picked jujubes for me. He also let me ride on the back of his bicycle.

Haraböji is a classic example of someone who left Korea to escape from poverty and seek better social and economic opportunities in Manchuria. When he

was in Korea, Haraböji worked part-time at Maruichi, a Japanese moving company, to earn tuition money. However, as soon as he graduated from elementary school, he decided that he could no longer live in Korea. According to Halmöni, “Haraböji felt that working for a low paying Japanese company would get him nowhere. So he and his two best friends ran away to Manchuria. They planned to continue their education there (because the school tuition was cheaper than in Korea) and find a professional job. In Manchuria, everything was inexpensive; for three cents, the three of them could eat as many steamed buns as they wanted.”

Fourteen years went by, without any news from Haraböji. Meanwhile, Halmöni’s brother, who had fled to Manchuria, finally sent a short message to his worried family in Korea. It was very brief; he was safe, and his wife, Wölge, should join him in Manchuria. As a safety precaution, he sent the message through a friend who was visiting his relatives in Korea. Soon after, he sent a second letter, one that changed Halmöni’s life.

“A few seasons had passed when Oppa sent another letter home, this time with a photograph. It was addressed to my parents and even my grandparents, but there was no return address. I wanted to know the contents of the letter, and my curiosity was satisfied when my mother came up to me and showed me the picture. It was a picture of Kim Sung-woon.

“As soon as I saw the photograph, I instantly recognized him as Oppa’s friend, the very young man that had plucked jujubes off the tree for me to eat and given me rides on his bicycle. The only difference was that the Kim Sung-woon in my memory was thirteen years old and the Kim Sung-woon in the picture was in his twenties. He

was more handsome now. I was secretly excited that I might be able to see him again and asked my mother where he is now. She replied, ‘Oppa ran into him in Manchuria. The letter he sent says that Kim Sung-woon wants to marry you. Jong-soo yah, you’re getting married.’ Although I hadn’t seen him for over ten years, my affection for him grew. I was very pleased and flattered when Ŏmŏni told me that my feelings were reciprocated. I smiled and dreamed about marrying him.

“When Ŏmŏni informed me of this, I was curious as to how Oppa and Sung-woon *ssi* met, but I knew Abŏji wouldn’t tell me. He was afraid that if word got out, the police would track Oppa down and arrest him; Manchuria was still under Japanese control. He was worried that out of youthful ignorance I might slip and tell someone where Oppa was. Ŏmŏni couldn’t tell me, because she didn’t know herself. She did not know how to read Chinese characters.⁶⁸

“Most of my family was happy for me, especially my father and brothers. My father often described Kim Sung-woon as ‘a dragon that had risen up from the sewer.’⁶⁹ He said, ‘Daughter, this man is very honest and kind. Do not go to Taegu; you don’t need any more schooling. Settle down and marry Kim Sung-woon.’ I was thrilled that my father approved, but I did not agree to marry Kim Sung-woon out of filial obedience. I agreed because I loved this man, and I was sure that he loved me, too.

“However my mother and elder sister opposed the union. My sister had returned to her *chinjŏng* (parents’ house) to give birth, as is the custom in Korea.

⁶⁸ At the time, Chinese characters were still widely used in writing letters. Moreover, because Manchuria had been part of China before the Japanese invasion, the addresses were written in Chinese.

⁶⁹ This metaphor means that a one-of-a-kind, exceptionally gifted man has been born to a couple of unworthy and ill-bred parents.

When she heard that I was going to marry Kim Sung-woon, she tried to persuade me that it was a bad idea. ‘Jong-soo yah, Kim Sung-woon may be a good person, but he is too poor. I heard that his parents are very ignorant peasants.’

“Then she whispered. ‘I heard from Oppa that Kim Sung-woon’s father is such an ignorant man that all he cares about is his supply of liquor. Even when his wife was giving birth to his third son, he just lay on the porch, smoking and complaining how loud his wife was being. Besides, he is the eldest son. Even if he is intelligent and competent, his family will be troublesome. As his wife, you will be responsible for taking care of his aging parents. Marriage is not just between a man and a woman; it is between a woman and the man’s family. What’s worse, they are not Christian. Jong-soo yah, you know as well as I do that you will surely run into difficulty. So please, please say you will not marry him!’”

When Halmöni’s sister warned Halmöni that her future husband’s family was not Christian, she knew that it would be difficult for a Christian to marry into a Confucian family. Confucianism values the tradition of ancestor worship, while for Christians, to worship anyone or anything other than God is idolatry. This ideological disparity created serious conflicts within families: “For a son to become a Christian was to betray his father and to rob the dead of the filial reverences that were due. No greater sin could be imagined in a land whose whole social fabric was shaped by Confucian patterns.”⁷⁰ Halmöni was often ridiculed by her mother-in-law for praying to and worshipping a foreign deity, and when something bad happened to a family member, my grandmother was blamed for it: “This happened because our ancestors are angry that we got such a stupid and unfilial daughter-in-law! You never

⁷⁰ Moffett, The Christians of Korea 40.

light incense or put fresh food before the altar. You show loyalty to a foreign god, but ignore your own ancestors!”

Even as Halmöni heard these horrible things about Haraböji’s family, she was determined to marry him. “I knew perfectly well that things would be difficult. In a Korean family, it is the eldest wife that must cook, clean, and care for her in-laws and her husband’s younger siblings while he is out earning money. The more ignorant the parent, the more unreasonable their demands and insensitive the treatment of their daughter-in-law would be. But none of this frightened me. I was naïve. I was in love.

“A few years earlier, I was in the marketplace with my mother when an old fortuneteller waved us over. His tiny wrinkled eyes peered at me curiously, and then he shook his head, clucking his tongue. He told me that if I married a very ignorant farmer, I would be happily married for a long time; but if married someone who was educated and intelligent, I would be miserable for the rest of my life. I didn’t take him seriously at the time, because fortunetelling is just superstition and witchery. Anyway, it was close enough – his family was notoriously ignorant. However, now that I think back, I suppose the old man knew what he was doing. Kim Sung-woon was a very smart man who made my life miserable.

“In his letter, Oppa told us what Sung-woon *ssi* had been doing for the past fourteen years. When he and his friends ran away to Manchuria, they arrived in a city called Fengtian.⁷¹ There, the three young men worked odd jobs and started earning money. In Manchuria, everything was cheap and plentiful; school was a lot cheaper, and after three years of study, they graduated from the Fengtian high school. Sung-

⁷¹ 봉천 (奉天) now known as Shenyang (沈阳)

woon *ssi* became a land appraiser for a Japanese company, while his two friends worked at different companies. They depended on each other like brothers.

“It had been three or four years since Sung-woon *ssi* contacted his parents. When he became promoted to a higher position with more pay, he invited his parents and brother to live with him in Manchuria. He supported his younger brothers’ education and made sure that they were given the opportunity to study as much as they wanted. From every monthly paycheck, Sung-woon *ssi* first set aside their tuition before using the rest for living expenses. He was a very good brother.

“Knowing how difficult his situation had been in Korea, how overjoyed Oppa must have been to finally meet his friend again! Oppa was determined to help Sung-woon *ssi* to make up for the last decade, and when Oppa found out that his friend still hadn’t gotten married, he immediately suggested me; I wasn’t married yet, and we had known each other since childhood. And so we got married.

“At the time I got married, the churches in Korea hadn’t been shut down yet. Services were held regularly; only this time, there were police officers standing guard at the rear of the church to make sure the sermons did not criticize the Japanese government or talk about Korean nationalism. I was still oblivious about the political atmosphere. I did not know that people were being killed for saying that they believed in God. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have had the courage to face the police. The one thing my parents instilled in me was the answer to one question; if someone were to ask me, ‘What religion are you?’ I would reply, ‘I am Christian.’ Other than that, I just stayed at home, doing household chores and learning how to become a good wife.

“When the day of the wedding was finally decided, it was decided that I would have a Western-style wedding in the Ŭisŏng brick church. Oppa wrote again to say that his heart broke, not being able to attend our wedding. (Sung-woon *ssi* had to get baptized in order to be allowed to marry in a church.) Because it was just a wedding, the police officers did not come. It was the winter of 1940 when I married Kim Sung-woon at the age of 19. I was considered an old maid by traditional standards, but I was an educated old maid. I was very proud that I would wear a white dress and lace veil. There was even a train of little children throwing flower petals ahead of me. I don’t remember much else about the wedding, except that it was very cold and before Christmas. (When I was young, I went around our village every Christmas Eve with Oppa and members of the church choir, singing Christmas carols. A few years later, the Japanese police restricted religious freedom and began to arrest carolers around Christmastime.)”

I wonder if Halmŏni has any regrets about marrying Harabŏji. If she had known everything that would happen, would she still have chosen to marry him? But I know Halmŏni is someone who does not dwell too long on the past. She accepts and moves on. If God willed this for her, she will submit herself to Him. With this faith, Halmŏni is able to sum up the courage to tell me about her painful past.

Migration and Life in Manchuria

“A week after the wedding, I followed my husband to Manchuria.⁷² It was during the Greater East Asian War.⁷³ Arriving in Seoul, I felt the true gravity of the situation for the first time. We checked into an inn near the train station. He ordered dinner for me then went out to check the train schedule.

“When the innkeeper brought our dinner, it didn’t look like anything I had ever eaten before. Instead of the usual rice and soup, it was a strange bowl of soupy wild herbs and cabbage with a few overcooked noodle strands floating on top. I asked the innkeeper if there was any rice. She laughed at me. She told me that even the inn was run on ration tickets; rice was out of the question. Since Ŭisŏng was rural, there were many rice paddies. Although we couldn’t afford to eat white rice everyday, we had plenty of other grains, such as barley, sweet rice, and millet.

“I sat alone in the room and ate the strange soup. Being a country girl, I was afraid of being alone; I even suspected my husband of abandoning me and running away to Manchuria by himself. To my relief, he came back in a few hours. He asked me how the meal was. Dinner was unsatisfying, but I was too embarrassed to tell my husband that I was still hungry.”

It was Halmŏni’s first time seeing a world outside the security of her hometown. For the first time, she felt the economic disparity between the capital, Seoul, and her rural hometown in Ŭisŏng. The once prosperous city of scholars and

⁷² Halmŏni went to Manchuria in 1940.

⁷³ The Greater East Asia War (*Dae Dongyang Chŏncheng* in Korean) is the official wartime name of the period from the Manchurian Incident in 1931 to Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945. However, notable Japanese historian Saburō Ienaga refuses to use this term and instead prefers the term ‘Pacific War’ (perhaps because of geographic issues – the war covers China, Southeast and Southwest Asia, and the Pacific Ocean).

royalty was now grim, poverty-stricken, and taken over by Japanese soldiers, officials, and civilians. People were hungry and wearied by the Japanese authority's harsh policies. The days were getting colder and shorter. Despite this, Halmöni's excitement was not dampened. She was now married to a good man, and she would soon meet her new family.

“Four generations had been living in my house when I left with my husband to go to Manchuria. Before I left, Ömöni gave me winter clothes that she had made. For weeks, Ömöni wove cotton and dyed the finished cloth to make a cloak. She spun silk as thin as hair to make a jacket and pants stuffed with soft cotton. Now that I think back, I can remember how small and neat the stitches were. I wore these clothes for the next couple of weeks and was glad that they were so warm. I did not stop to think how much Ömöni must have strained her eyes and back to make them. Later, my younger sister told me that my parents and grandparents were so sad after I left that they lay ill for a few days. I was an unfilial daughter; all I could think about was my excitement of seeing new people, new places.

“I had always been very curious about automobiles and wanted to ride in one. There were dirt roads, but none of the roads were paved. However, I had seen some trucks that could seat seven people. I had never seen a bus before. The Ŭisöng bus came twice daily, once in the morning and once at night. If one took the evening bus to Taegu, one had to wait until the next morning to return home.

“The bus ride from Ŭisöng to Taegu took 7 hours. The concept of a public bus was fairly new. I heard from a woman sitting next to me that one time, there was a young woman who was traveling with her newborn son. She didn't want to expose

her breast when feeding the baby, so she wrapped him tightly against her chest and covered his head with a blanket. By the end of the trip, the young mother looked down to see that her child was dead. The bus was so crowded and the road so bumpy that baby had suffocated to death on his mother's breast. The young woman returned home, crazed and helpless, carrying her dead baby.

“After seven hours of the horrible, bumpy ride on the bus, we arrived in Taegu. It was raining, and the road was riddled with muddy potholes. There were no trains going directly from Taegu to Mudanjiang (Manchuria), so we had to go to Seoul Train Station and switch trains. Overall, it took three full days to reach Manchuria.

“I went to Manchuria wearing a delicate silk bridal dress and white, padded cotton socks called *bŏsŏn* – very impractical. As the train passed through Wŏnsan, Chŏngjin, and Tumen River, I could feel that the air was getting colder. I was too embarrassed to say I was cold, so to take my mind off it, I tried to think about how lucky I was to marry the man I love, and how exciting it was to be leaving my home for the first time. Eventually, the landscape turned completely white and barren; not a speck of green showed. I assumed that it must have snowed the previous day.

“It was common to see Korean peasants carrying bundles that looked big enough to crush them, with gourd dippers of various sizes hanging on the sides. These peasants were sitting and standing, cramped in the aisles, but still tired enough to be nodding off to sleep in a loud steam train. I did not know, or even care, that these people were migrating to Manchuria with their young children in search of a better life. I only cared about the fact that I was following my husband to my new home.

“The train crossed the Tumen River, and late in the third day, we finally came to a stop at the Mukden⁷⁴ Train Station. When I got off the train, I saw many Korean immigrants. They were loading carts full of household supplies and more gourds. There wasn’t enough food for everyone in Korea, so the Japanese authorities encouraged many families to go to Manchuria, promising that they would be given farm land and other riches. My husband told me that he was one of these people, employed by a Japanese colonizing company as a land surveying engineer. Mudanjiang was one of the biggest Korean colonized cities in Manchuria; here, the Koreans would farm the uncultivated land and grow rice that Japan would take away to their archipelago.

“Getting off the train at Mudanjiang Train Station, it was so cold that it hurt to breathe. I covered my mouth and nose with my thin, mostly decorative scarf, but the steam of breath from my mouth rose up to my eyes and froze my eyelids shut. Every time I blinked, my eyes watered with sharp pain; one or two eyelashes stuck to the bottom of my eyelids and were plucked out when I reopened my eyes. I had never experienced this kind of cold before.

“There were rows of rickshaws waiting in front of the station. My husband hired two and rode it all the way to his house. He must have been making a decent amount of money; it was a long way. Perhaps he knew that I was tired and didn’t want me to expend my energy walking home – my husband was such a thoughtful man. My feet froze during the ride, because I only had on a pair of the *bōsōn* socks and thin rubber shoes called *gomushin*. The Manchurian natives wore heavy fur boots to protect their legs and feet and still had trouble preventing frostbite, so you

⁷⁴ Also known as Fengtian, Shengjing, or Shenyang.

can imagine how cold my feet must have been. When I got off the rickshaw to enter the house, I had a difficult time walking because of the pain.

“When I entered the house, there were two rooms. One was a bedroom, the other was the kitchen. The kitchen was bare, except for a great big rice pot in a corner and many wooden lids lined against the wall. In the bedroom, there were lots of wooden shelves and wicker baskets for storing clothes, but no closets. It didn’t matter much; each person basically had two outfits – one for summer and one for winter. I, myself, wasn’t able to bring a lot of clothes, because the distance from my hometown to Manchuria was so great.

“Inside the room, the walls were covered with two centimeters of ice. It was below the freezing point outside and warm inside because of the coal stove that never went out. On top of the stove was a large cauldron of boiling water. The steam from the cauldron froze onto the walls and created the thick layer of ice. Our greatest daily task was scraping it off. Laundry was done indoors. We drew water from the well and brought it inside so it wouldn’t freeze. There was no plumbing, so all the water we used was collected in a big bucket in the kitchen, and waste water was thrown outside in the ditches along the road. The water in the bucket froze as it was thrown out. The roads and ditches were frozen solid, and people frequently slipped on patches of ice while walking outside. I was overwhelmed by this, and felt afraid for the first time since leaving my parents.

“That night I nearly froze to death. I barely got any sleep. Besides the bone-chilling cold, it was the most awkward night. Everyone slept in one room. My mother-in-law had set up a curtain on one side of the room to separate my husband

and me from the rest of the family. I could barely breathe – every movement could be heard. A few days later, my blanket rustled when I was turning on my side. My mother-in-law’s voice pierced the dark, ‘Leave the poor man alone for one night. He’s drained enough energy at work.’ I felt what could only be described as terrorized mortification.”

At this point, I stop reading to cover my face in disbelief. How Halmõni managed to have three children is a miracle to me. I had heard from my mom and Halmõni how interfering Korean mothers-in-law could be, but to be interfering with a young couple’s marriage... poor Halmõni! I cannot imagine such a restricted lifestyle. I let out a half-laugh, half-groan of incredulity and continue reading, only to discover that Halmõni’s story gets worse.

“The next morning, I woke up, and my mother-in-law made me breakfast. The rest of the family had gotten up earlier to work in the field. I guess they let me sleep a little more because they knew I was tired from the journey. That was the last time I got up after sunrise. After I finished eating, my mother-in-law sat down with me and told me a few things about living in Manchuria. Most importantly, each neighborhood had only one “toilet.” I say “toilet” because it was like nothing I had seen before: in the middle of a faraway, deserted field (to prevent the stench from wafting back into the residential area), there was a deep hole in the ground surrounded by four wooden posts. These posts were covered with straw mats. Just looking at it made me whimper. Going to the toilet was like a journey to hell. When the sun went down, it was difficult to see in front of me, so I constantly tripped over

rocks. During the daytime, I saw that these “rocks” were actually frozen balls of excrement. Apparently, some people didn’t make it to the hole. I did my best to avoid the cursed trip to the toilet. I tried not to eat or drink past dark so I wouldn’t have to go to the bathroom too often. At night, we used a Soviet-style [*sic*] chamber pot to relieve our bladders.”

Thank God for Western toilets and indoor plumbing! I remember visiting my relatives in Korea when I was five years old. We decided to go hiking up a mountain; my mom and aunts prepared lunch boxes full of *kimbap* and thermoses full of fragrantly salty seaweed soup. I was excited, but only because I did not know what rural Korea was like. When we arrived at the foot of the mountain, my uncle warned everyone to use the restroom before starting. There were two brick huts that looked just about ready to collapse. To my horror, my aunt said it was the women’s toilet. She handed me some pumpkin leaves and told me to try holding my breath inside. Confused, I asked her what the leaves were for. She said they were to be used as toilet paper. Completely shocked, I walked near the hut. A hundred yards from the hut, I understood why I was discouraged to breathe. I started crying, and ended up going behind a big bush. That was nearly 17 years ago, and I recently heard from my aunt that indoor plumbing had now reached even the most remote areas of Korea. If I were in Halmõni’s situation in Manchuria, I think I would have made the backyard look like Swiss cheese and risk getting yelled at by my mother-in-law.

Anyhow, Halmõni doesn’t dwell much longer on her descriptions of the facilities and swiftly moves on to neighborhood life and the richness of Manchurian farmland: “The houses in Manchuria looked exactly the same – two rooms and a

kitchen – and stuck together all in a row, it was difficult to distinguish without the help of the signs hanging in front of each door. One day, a Japanese man, looking extremely content with himself, walked into my house singing a Korean song, ‘*Arirang, arirang....*’ It appeared that he had just come in from the bathhouse. I was surprised and asked him who he was. He looked just as stunned and embarrassed. He mistook my house for his. Realizing his mistake, he apologized profusely and bowed many times before running out. I giggled. These mistakes were common.

“A nice Japanese couple with a dog lived next to us. My husband and I went over to visit them a few times. After drinking some tea and having a lively conversation, the wife asked us why, in Korean households, when visitors came in, everyone stood up to welcome them. In Japan, everyone kneeled down and bowed to welcome guests. Korean and Japanese customs were so different from each other.

“The land in Manchuria was full of minerals. There were no rocks to be found. Digging was an easy task; a few feet under the topsoil was silt. Regardless of where one drove a new pump into the ground, there was always plenty of yellow, muddy water. The water wasn’t drinkable, of course. Every house had a homemade water filtration system made out of a wooden bucket filled with layers of sand, pebbles, and charcoal. The Koreans never drank dirty water; we always took care to properly filter it. On the other hand, Manchurian Chinese didn’t know about the filtration devices, so they boiled their water. None of them drank cold water, not even the beggars. In every street corner was a water heater so that the beggars could drink. Even if they didn’t wash the dirt off their vegetables, they always boiled their water.

“Another difference between the Koreans and the Manchurian Chinese is laundry. During the winter, Koreans heated water on the stove and did laundry in the kitchen. However, the Manchurian Chinese didn’t bother washing their clothes in such cold weather. Every winter, they were crawling with fleas and lice. (Even in the summer they wear winter coats because it occasionally rains and becomes cold.)

“White clothes eventually turned yellow after much washing, probably because of the yellow water. Unfortunately, I had brought a lot of finely woven white cotton and linen clothing with me to Manchuria. In those days, it was fashionable for new brides to wear white linen or silk. It was also a sign of the bride’s family’s wealth – I had a couple of trunks full of fine, expensive linen.”⁷⁵

Despite all of these discomforts, Halmöni has some fond memories of Manchuria, “Life in Manchuria was good, but a different type of good than in Korea. In Korea, a good life usually meant a life of leisure, many servants, and many children. On the other hand, in Manchuria, the adage, ‘you reap what you sow’ was a reality. Wealth and poverty depended on the diligence of the individual. You reaped two or three times what you sowed. If a farmer worked hard during the spring and summer, his harvest was abundant in the fall, and his family would have no worries about food for the next couple of years.

“Manchurian soil is rich and sandy; this contributes to the success of farming root vegetables such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, radishes, and garlic. Because the ground was not rocky and the silt was full of nutrients, vegetables grew easily.

⁷⁵ On page 59, Halmoni mentions not being able to bring a lot of clothes, and that each family member only had one set of clothing, each for summer and winter. However, Halmöni must have meant outerwear. Judging by her family’s financial and social status, they would not have let Halmöni leave without a decent wardrobe.

Everyone planted cabbages and pumpkins in their front yards. In America, one mixes fertilizer with the dirt to grow something, but in Manchuria, growing big, healthy vegetables wasn't a problem. For example, when a farmer planted potatoes in a plot of land the size of a small room, the potato plants grew quickly. When it came time to harvest the tubers, the farmers pulled out the plants and quickly picked the potatoes that were still hanging on the roots. The potatoes that fell to the ground were left to rot in the overturned earth. Even so, there was more than enough to eat for the entire year. The rotting potatoes served as a rich, natural fertilizer to the next year's crop of potatoes.

“Also, these peasants knew the value of education and sent their children to big city schools such as Xinjing⁷⁶ and Haerbin. They did not wish for their children to follow their footsteps and do backbreaking work on a farm. Their children would work in companies and earn a lot of money. With this in mind, the peasants worked incessantly for the next generation. On the other hand, lazy people were always struggling with poverty. Even when they were distributed land, they did nothing with it. They smoked opium and gambled all day while their fields were overgrown with weeds.

“Koreans that had migrated to Manchuria in the early 1900s were very well situated and prosperous. In comparison, those who stayed in Korea were politically repressed and exceedingly poor (at least, this is what I have observed about the people around me in Mudanjiang; I cannot vouch for other areas of Manchuria). In Korea, most families got a small plot of land and most of the fall harvest was taken away as tax. What was left after taxation was not nearly enough food for the family,

⁷⁶ 新京 (lit. new city) Manchukuo's capital city. Now known as Changchun (长春).

so they starved in the spring. However in Manchuria, each family received almost forty times the amount of land, and although this may seem wonderful, the farmers need to put in back-breaking work year-round. Despite their bodies being exhausted from never-ending field work, their minds are at peace. Fatigue is preferable over starvation. They can even sell some of the rice and make a profit.

“Manchurian Chinese were good farmers, but they didn’t know how to farm grains. Corn and sorghum were their staple crops. However, Koreans grew rice, barley, sweet rice, and other kinds of grains in abundance. We [Koreans] also grew all sorts of beans. At the end of the harvest, the Japanese soldiers came and took away a portion of the grain, calling it tax. They fed this to their soldiers, and the rest was sent back to Japan.

“Because the Manchurian Chinese didn’t know how to farm rice, they brought Koreans from Korea, telling them that if they come to Manchuria, they will make them rich. The Manchurian Chinese gave the Korean immigrants approximately 40 acres of land.⁷⁷ The Koreans were excited; they said the land was so vast that when they started to weed and sow seeds on one side of the field, wheat already sprouted by the time they got to the middle of the field. When the weeding and sowing of the far end of the field was done, the wheat that was planted first would already be golden and bow its head, ready to harvest. This illustrates how fertile the land was and how perfect the climate was for farming grains.

“I remember I was riding the train with my husband. It was spring, and the hills were covered with peonies, daisies, bluebells, and lilies. Further along, scarlet poppies, orange Chinese lanterns, and sweet briar brambles painted the riverbank a

⁷⁷ 40 acres is a lot of land to Koreans who are used to mountainous terrain with very little flat ground.

brilliant red and white. Cows grazed on an open field. Korean cattle were fat and healthy, but those Manchurian cattle looked skinny and weak. I saw that the farmers had to use at least two oxen to till the fields, unlike Korean farmers who used only one sturdy cow. In Korea, we fed our cattle straw mixed with boiled beans: a cup of beans, rice water, and cut straw is the basic Korean cow feed. I saw my brothers do this a lot. However, in Manchuria, they fed them raw whole grains and straw, which is why the cattle never got fat. Not enough protein.

“In Manchuria, there were many Korean women from Northern Korea. They were very fashionable, with silk skirts, high heels, and fine cotton shirts. I admired them and thought they must be very well-educated upper class women. I later found out that these women had never been to school. They couldn’t even write their own names. I had wondered why they brought all of their mail to me to read to them. Now I knew. These women were very determined, hard workers. While their husbands went to work in factories or fields, they went to work on Chinese farms. After a day’s work, they picked up vegetables that had fallen on the fields during the harvest and sold them on the road home. They saved this money and bought expensive clothes for themselves. Although they worked very hard, they looked very elegant and well-kept.

“I still admire the strength of the North Korean women. These women were so diligent and independent that they would earn more money than their husbands. They did not need to rely on anyone other than themselves. On the other hand, South Korean women tend to be very timid and greatly dependent upon their husbands. I suppose this is because many of the descendants of the royal family and upper class

lived in the south. For example, the Andong Kims, who were descendents of the royal house, lived in Andong of North Kyōngsang Province, just north of Ŭisōng.⁷⁸

There is a common saying ridiculing the *Yangban* upper class: even if they are starving, the *Yangban* would refuse to go out and earn money because of their pride. They would stay in their rooms and pick their teeth, talking about how blue their blood is.

“Not too long after, my husband’s company transferred him to a place called Helim.⁷⁹ (My husband’s job required him to move a lot. Before Helim and Mudanjiang, he had lived in Xinjing and Harbin.) Helim was an agricultural village of Korean immigrants. Some had recently migrated. Others were considerably well off and had been living in Helim for a decade or so. I talked to the farmers’ wives and observed their lifestyle. They called me *Se-seksi* (new bride) and enthusiastically told me about their lives and told me some neighborhood gossip. The women told me that it became cold so soon in Manchuria that they had to finish *kimchang*⁸⁰ before August. Otherwise, the ground would freeze up and digging a hole to bury the kimchi jars would be impossible.

“Every fall, the women harvested the vegetables that they had planted in their front yards. They would pickle these and make kimchi. The Chinese had their own sort of “kimchi.” They pickled cabbage, but unlike us, they didn’t add any other seasoning to the wilted vegetable. The Chinese didn’t eat a lot of rice; it was usually corn bread. Richer people ate wheat bread. They also ate a lot of pork, but not a lot

⁷⁸ There are over 300 different ancestral branches within the surname Kim.

⁷⁹ Hailin.

⁸⁰ Neighborhood women gathering to prepare enough kimchi (spicy pickled vegetables) to last the whole winter.

of beef. The Koreans who had lived in Manchuria for a long time told me that the butcher threw away the feet and head of the cow. How wasteful! There is a lot of meat in the head, and the feet make great soup!

“After pulling the vegetables from the ground, the earth was flattened out and sprayed with water. The next morning, the yard would be nicely frozen over with a clean layer of ice. The rice fields were also sprayed down with water. On top of this, the women shucked and beat the rice. Because of the protective layer of ice, they didn’t have to worry about getting stones or dust in the rice. When the shucking was finished, the rice came out clean; there was no need to wash it before cooking it. In Korea, there are lots of small stones and dust in the rice, so it is very important to thoroughly sieve and wash the rice to avoid cracking a tooth on a stray pebble.

“In Korea, vegetables are generally difficult to grow. We farm a lot of lettuce, cucumber, radish, pumpkin, pepper, and crown daisy – the hardy plants – but cabbage, the main ingredient in kimchi, is only planted during the fall when most of the insects are gone. The most common spring kimchi is made of pickled cucumber. However, Manchurian springs are too cold for insects and the land is rich in minerals, so cabbage can be planted in both spring and fall. Everyone grew cabbage and other vegetables in their front yards and enjoyed fresh produce all spring. It was odd to see cabbage kimchi so early in the year. I suppose this was one good reason to come to Manchuria.

“In the summer, they caught small fish like minnows and catfish from the little irrigation pool in the middle of the rice paddies to make soup. They also salted and pickled the fish to make a paste for the kimchi. Ironically, this pungent

fermented fish paste made the kimchi very refreshing; just thinking about it makes my mouth water. My husband caught some of this fish for me, because he knew I loved to cook with the fish paste. I would shyly take the basket of fish from him, secretly thrilled that I would be able to make my favorite fish soup. However, for some reason, while the rest of the family relished the soup at dinner, my husband didn't even dip his spoon into the soup bowl. When I asked him what was wrong, he just smiled at me and said that he wasn't hungry. At first, I thought he didn't like my cooking, and I felt awful and humiliated for being such a bad wife, but he later told me that he couldn't get himself to eat the fish because he had seen for himself the murky waters the fish lived in. After hearing this, the fish did not taste as good as before.

“I went to the fields a few times to visit the village women. The mugwort plants growing on the sides of the field were so big and lush that they were taller than me. In the fall, the villagers cut these plants and used the stalks to stoke fires. In comparison, the mugwort in America are thin and only come up to my waist. The mugwort leaves were used to make rope, which the men used to light their pipes when they went to gather firewood in the winter. (Mugwort only smolders and burns for a long time when lit and produces hot ash.)

“The villagers gathered wood only in the winter after all the grains were harvested. Around two or three in the afternoon, the men would start off, carrying a huge round of rice cake that their wives made for them in a wooden cart. They couldn't take normally cooked rice because it would freeze. But the rice cake was easily thawed in a little heat, so they built a small fire for it while they worked. After

they were done gathering branches of oak, the rice cake would be ready to eat. From morning to late afternoon, people gathered wood. By the end of one month, they gathered enough to last through the long, harsh winter. The lazy men gathered wheat straw to light their stoves, but the ash from burning the straw was very light and flew all around the kitchen and inside the rooms.

“The village wives were busy making rice cakes in the winter. All day, they beat the rice until it became a sticky lump. In the spring, they gathered herbs and wild vegetables. One spring, I went with them to gather vegetables. We went into the hills with baskets hung around our shoulders. The women took only rice and bean paste for lunch. I wondered why they ate so little for lunch, I soon found that on the hills, they gathered wild lettuce that was so tender and delicious. There was no need to wash the leaves because the morning dew had washed the dirt away. The earth was so fertile that the herbs grew tender and shiny, as if each leaf had been carefully oiled. The women also looked for quail eggs. Egg hunting was great fun. In a great field of swaying reeds, we yelled as loud as we could, waving our arms high above our heads. Great flocks of quails flew up, startled by the ruckus we made. When we quickly went to the places where quails flew up, there were big nests filled with enough eggs for each woman to fill her basket. I had a lot of fun that spring.”

We have been in America for eight years. But that doesn't seem to change Halmõni's daily activities. Halmõni goes out early in the morning and comes back with plastic grocery bags full of *namul* – wild onions and lettuce, baby mugwort leaves and wild watercress. I don't know where she gets them from, but the pancakes she makes out of her morning harvest are indescribably delicious as afternoon snacks.

One Saturday morning, I ask Halmõni if I can go with her to pick *namul*. We start heading into the forest through a well worn trail in the back of the house. She points to each leaf and berry, explaining the medicinal and culinary uses of every plant. We arrive at a stream, where Halmõni tells me to take off my shoes and socks. We wade around the shallow area for a while. Halmõni is having as much fun as I am. It's been a long time since she's spent more than an hour with me. Excited that I show the same amount of enthusiasm and interest in learning about nature, she turns stones over, showing me that there is life under every rock. She catches a squirming crawfish in her bare hands and places it in my tiny hands. I am entranced by the thing that looks like a baby lobster until one of its claws clamps onto my finger. I yelp and fling the crawfish away from me. Halmõni quickly looks to see if my finger is bleeding, but when she sees it isn't, she laughs and says I am going to be fine. We follow the stream a little further and come across a clump of tender green shoots. "Shin-hae *yah!* *Chõgi!* Over there!" she cries in excitement. "That's watercress!" We fill up a bag with the leaves and head home.

Everything is fine until a neighborhood woman is walking in our direction. When she sees Halmõni and me, she frowns, then, smiles uncertainly. She sees an old Asian lady with a brown scarf tied around her graying hair, dressed in a lumpy, oversized gray jacket, baggy sweat pants, and dirty sneakers on her feet. Next to her is a little girl who looks about ten years old, wearing a purple windbreaker with jeans and sneakers, but holding dirty, wet socks in one hand. Both are carrying plastic bags that have Thank You! printed in red, filled with what look like weeds.

Halmõni brightly sings “Goom-mo-ning!” to the surprised lady, oblivious to the fact that the white lady thinks we are two foreign eccentrics. My cheeks heat up in embarrassment, and I snap at Halmõni to hurry up. When we get home, I quickly go upstairs to wash up and cool my burning face in the sink. The next day, when Halmõni asks me if I want to go with her again, I say to her, “No thanks, Halmõni. I have to read for school.” She looks a little disappointed, but she knows that school is more important to her granddaughter than going *namul*-picking. I have completely forgotten the fun I had with Halmõni. Only shame and humiliation remain.

If only that bewildered woman had known Halmõni’s story. If only I had known about Halmõni earlier.

Crime and Drugs

“The crime rate in Manchuria was high because of the opium addicts. In the spring, corpses were strewn along the roads. These people had smoked opium in the opium dens all winter and finally got kicked out when they ran out of money. They had nowhere to go, so they froze to death on the streets. I sat on my neighbor’s porch, staring at these dead bodies in shock until the county’s hired workers came to collect the cadavers in wooden carts and dump them into the Mukden River. When the carts passed by, their wheels got stuck in the deep ruts and heads loosely bounced against the sides.”

Unexpectedly, Korea played a significant role in the East Asian drug trade in the 1920s, supplying the Manchukuo regime with opium. Protected from the Chinese

law enforcement as Japanese nationals, Koreans migrated to Manchuria to become poppy farmers, drug dealers, and to open up their own opium dens.⁸¹ Drug trafficking was a government supported activity because it brought a lot of revenue to the Japanese Government:

With an estimated 1.5 million addicts to supply...the Manchukuo regime was forced to apply to the Japanese Government for additional supplies to meet the demands of its addicts. In response, Taiwan and Korea were permitted to commence exporting opium and narcotics.”⁸²

Naturally, the Koreans’ involvement in drug trafficking did not help to improve their international reputation, and in turn, it marred the credibility of those who were abroad, working for the independence of Korea.⁸³

“Mudanjiang is separated into Chinese, Japanese, and Korean towns. The Korean town was just recently built; there was still a lot of construction, and it was unattractive. In contrast, the Chinese town had many elaborately built structures and big stores. I went with a few village women to a Chinese store. One of the women said that we must get there before 3 p.m., but I did not know why. It was a great brick building with pictures of Confucius and Mencius hanging all over the walls. In one corner, there was a shrine with a pig’s head, bowls of grain, and lit incense sticks. On our way back, we stopped by a house to collect our rations. They didn’t give us rice, but did give us a small section of fabric. Coming out, we encountered four or five horse-sized dogs that were most likely there to guard the house. I nearly died of

⁸¹ John M. Jennings, "The Forgotten Plague: Opium and Narcotics in Korea under Japanese Rule, 1910-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 29.4 (1995): 795.

⁸² Jennings, "The Forgotten Plague: Opium and Narcotics in Korea under Japanese Rule, 1910-1945," 809.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 812. Quoted from J. B. Powell, "Opium and Narcotics in Harbin and Mukden," *The China Weekly Review* (1929): 489.

fright. Every afternoon at five o' clock, the stores and houses securely locked their doors with heavy bolts and iron gates. It must have been to keep the rampant thieves and opium druggies out.

“Once, the village water pump disappeared. Someone always brings in the pump handle at night, so it won't get stolen, but one morning, we discovered that the entire pump had been plucked out of the ground. Some of the village women formed a search party for the missing water pump, and I followed them. I was curious to see how they were going to look for the pump. The other villagers told me that there were Chinese thieves everywhere. They stole other people's property at night and shamelessly sold it in their stores during the day. Even if the owner found the stolen item, there was no way to get it back without paying for it first. That is exactly what the women had to do. When we located the pump, we had no choice but to buy our own pump back.

“There was one particular market that was notorious for selling stolen items. The Japanese called it *sho-tou-machi*. Opium addicts stole various items and sold them to shop owners for drug money. This place was so infamous for its thieves; people often joked ‘Watch your shoes or they'll get stolen right off your feet!’”

Curious Customs and Cultural Differences

“During the Pacific War, the stores were mostly empty except for sesame, sunflower, and watermelon seeds. Rich or poor, all Manchurian Chinese loved to eat seeds, much like Americans love to chew gum. I found it fascinating to see them eat as they walked. They were master seed eaters: one would grab a handful of seeds

from his pockets and move it into his mouth, somehow use his tongue and teeth to crack open the seeds, eat the fruit inside, and then spit out the skins at amazing speeds. There was also something the Manchurian Chinese called fist cakes. The cakes were just handfuls of green onions and other vegetables wrapped in thin crepes of corn batter.

“The Japanese were in control of food distribution in Manchuria as well as Korea. Without ration tickets, one couldn’t eat rice. However, because Helim was an agricultural village, I could buy and eat as much grain as I liked. I had lived in Manchuria for four years before I went back to Korea to see my family in Ŭisŏng. I was horrified to see that their rations were bean scraps, fit to feed the pigs. The beans had rotted and molded. Using this putrid bean mixture, the Ŭmŏni mixed some barley and the family ate it instead of rice. I could not bear to eat any of it, and I realized how lucky I was in Manchuria. Some people who had a little more money bought packages of very stale dried squid to eat with their beans and barley. I realized that if I were to avoid starvation, I had better go back to Manchuria and at least die on a full stomach.

“A relative came over to see me and said, ‘Jong-soo yah, don’t go back to Manchuria. It won’t be too long before Korea will regain independence.’ Independence. This word was taboo – a word that I only heard in my dreams. I ignored his warning and decided to return to my husband’s house as soon as possible. Before I left, I bought a few yards of silk hoping to make some new *hanbok* skirts for myself. I never would have guessed that my relative was right. Not even a full year

passed before Japan surrendered. I didn't get a chance to wear any of the clothes I made from that length of silk. I had to abandon it when I was fleeing from Manchuria.

“After spending a few happy years in the quiet village in Helim, we returned to Mudanjiang. The war was raging on, and the situation in Manchuria was bad, but not as bad as in Korea. To try to forget about the war, my neighbors invited me to go with them to the fields to gather wild onions. Although it was spring, new leaves hadn't sprouted yet and dead leaves covered the ground like snow. It reminded me of the Korean barley fields during wintertime. Up ahead I spotted the field of wild onions we had been looking for.

“We started picking onions, one by one, until we came upon a coffin. There was a dead man inside. He was naked. The opium addicts had stolen the clothes off the corpse. If the man had had golden teeth, they would have chiseled it out of his mouth and bought more opium. After seeing the corpse, I was in a state of shock. I didn't understand why the coffin wasn't buried. My neighbors told me that it was a matter of hierarchy. If the ancestor of the man had been buried, he would have been buried too. Obviously, his ancestors hadn't been buried; how could he dare bury his body when his forefathers hadn't had this luxury? I was frightened and wanted to leave, but my companions wanted to collect more wild onions, so we left the body and went to another field. We used the wild onions to make radish kimchi.

“I saw many customary Manchurian practices. First, I saw the funeral of a rich man. The dead man's family tied straw ropes around their waists to symbolize their mourning, but they were running around, laughing and eating food. People blew trumpets, and the whole village was noisy. This reminded me of Korean weddings.

When one gets married in Korea, the two families exchange letters of marital consent. For those who receive consent letters in reply, they blow trumpets around the village and celebrate the upcoming wedding; for those who don't, there is only shame and silence. A similar custom is practiced in Manchuria. The only difference is that the trumpets were being blown for a dead man. A day before the funeral, there was a ritual in which the funeral party burned statues of cows and horses, along with paper money. The next day, the coffin was tied with rope. The ends of rope were shouldered by the male family members. The whole process looked very impressive. There were many mourners and the dead man had many strong sons. However, someone told me that despite the impressive funeral procession, if the dead man's ancestors had not been buried, his coffin would have been left out in the field.

“I also saw a poor man's funeral. His was very simple. There were no trumpets, and not very many people mourning his death. His coffin was strapped to a wooden cart and the family walked behind it, wailing ‘Aiya!’

“Next, I saw a wedding. The groom looked about nine or ten years old. His bride looked much older, about sixteen years old. She was sobbing. I asked a woman standing next to me, ‘Why is she crying?’ She replied, ‘The girl is crying because her family sold her to the groom's family.’ Apparently, only rich boys could afford to get married; poor men had a hard time finding girls willing to marry them, so most were old bachelors. The little boy had a big crown on his head and was happily munching on sweets, but the girl didn't stop crying. The mother tried to console her daughter, but she ended up crying, too.⁸⁴ Finally, the girl controlled herself enough to go

⁸⁴ Similarly, in Korea, the bride was usually much older than the groom, and it was common for the wife to raise her husband until he came of age to consummate the marriage.

around to the groom's family and friends and bow before them. When she came before them, each person gave her money. This money was hers alone. Perhaps it was money to console her for when her husband grows up and starts bringing in concubines. I saw many families in which one man had numerous wives. The first wife looked old enough to be his mother, while his last concubine looked young enough to be his granddaughter. I thought this system was unfair; while rich men had too many wives to handle, poor men died without ever having been married.

“The strangest and most horrifying custom was the way they handled the death of children. I happened to overhear some elderly women in our village say that when a child died, they threw the body into the pig pen. If the pigs ate the child's body, then they thought that the child's soul was finally resting peacefully. If the body was left half-eaten, it was considered bad luck, so they would take out the body, cover it in oil, and roast it over a fire before throwing it back into the pen. Then the pigs would finish eating the corpse. Manchurian Chinese loved pigs so much that when they dreamed of pigs, they got up the next morning and went gambling, because they believed they were lucky that day. It was as if the pig was their god. In one rich man's kitchen, I saw a pig's head in the corner surrounded by piles of sweet delicacies and burning incense.”

There was a cultural and ideological divide within the Korean community, and at times, within the family. One such example can be seen in Halmöni's story regarding her first two children. Halmöni gave birth to her first child, a girl, in 1941, “When she was born, everyone praised her beauty. Her eyes were big, and her nose was not flat, like most Korean babies.” Unfortunately, the infant caught scarlet fever

around her first birthday and died. Halmõni was pregnant with her second child at that time, so she wasn't able to nurse her daughter during her illness, "My poor, beautiful girl was dying, and I couldn't go to her. My mother-in-law didn't want me to catch the fever and endanger my unborn child. I saw her flushed face and watched her breathe her last labored breath through a crack in the door."

Halmõni's second child was a son. Everyone was thrilled. There was a son to carry on the Kim family name. He was very strong and handsome from the beginning, "My second child was special. His legs were long and sturdy, and his feet were so big compared to the rest of his body. He learned how to walk before he was a year old."

One day, Halmõni was running after her son when she passed an old beggar who was crippled in one leg. He looked at her son and muttered, "A fine, handsome boy. But..." He sighed and walked off, never finishing his last sentence. Halmõni didn't think much about it, and told her mother-in-law when they got home.

Her mother-in-law's reaction was surprising. She started to scold Halmõni for letting the beggar go, "Stupid woman! You should have held onto his pant leg and begged him to finish his sentence. It was probably about something unlucky. You should have brought him home!"

Halmõni started to worry about what her mother-in-law said, but there was nothing that could be done. Then again, her mother-in-law didn't think so. She demanded that a shaman be brought to their home to appease the demons who wanted to harm her grandson. However, Halmõni was Christian, and shamanism was a form of idolatry, "I told my mother-in-law that I would never betray my God. She cursed

me, saying that my Western influence was clouding my judgment, but I didn't listen to her." Halmõni stood firm in her refusal.

Shortly after, there was another bout of scarlet fever in the village, and her son contracted the disease. Halmõni tried everything she could, from modern medicines to trying to sweat out the fever with coal embers. But in the end, she suffered the loss of her second child. Halmõni lost all hope, "I was so depressed; two children dying within a year of each other. I wanted to die. I ran into the woods, trying to forget about my pain. I was sobbing until I heard a wolf howl in the distance. My sorrow was instantly replaced by fear, and I ran all the way home and shut the door on my ankle. Even when I lost all of my children, I still feared for my own life. After that, I forced myself to move on. I was still young; I would have more children. But in order for this to happen, I would have to be alive." Halmõni's mother-in-law never forgave her; she blamed her grandson's death on her daughter-in-law's obstinacy and her cursed Western "Yasu" religion.⁸⁵

War

"When I was walking through a field in Mudanjiang, I saw a dead child's abandoned body. I was so traumatized by this that I came home and lay sick for three days. The war was getting worse. The Japanese started training the Korean womenfolk in daily one-hour war evacuation drills while our husbands worked out in the fields, factories, or companies.

⁸⁵ Jesus in Korea is pronounced, *Yesu*, but the uneducated Koreans mispronounced it as "*Yasu*."

“Once, I went to visit the countryside with my mother-in-law, and upon our arrival, we saw a big mound of dirt. When we asked the villagers, they told us that it was a grave for the Koreans who had been massacred a few days ago. The Japanese had been inviting the Koreans to Manchuria, giving them land to plant rice. The Manchurian Chinese were indignant; who were the Japanese to give away the land of their ancestors to the recently arrived Koreans? They called a big meeting with the Koreans. It was a rainy day, and the water flowed through the ditches in front of the houses. The Japanese encouraged the suspicious Koreans to go to the meeting, which they called *tonarigumi* – an organization of neighbors holding meetings to discuss agricultural issues. They said that it meant that the Manchurian Chinese were willing to cooperate. No one imagined the Manchurian Chinese would conspire to cut down the Koreans as they walked through the door. The last few Koreans to arrive saw red water running through the ditches and grew fearful. Instead of going to the meeting, they ran to the Japanese police station and reported that something at the meeting was awry. When the police arrived at the meeting house, they found a pile of dead Koreans inside and Manchurian Chinese wielding axes, ready to cut down the next person who crossed the threshold. The police killed a lot of Manchurian Chinese that day.

“I heard another story about a war called the Sino-Japanese War. I had never heard of it before. Anyhow, Koreans who were living in China were leaving en masse to avoid getting caught up in the war. At night, when they were hiding from soldiers, a baby cried. The people in the group complained that the baby was going to give away their hideout to the enemy. The baby’s mother had no choice but to kill

her baby by placing him face-down on a rock and sitting on top of it. I felt a chill down my spine. How could a mother kill her own child?

“The attitude of the Manchurian Chinese toward Koreans changed with each event. Before the war, they welcomed Koreans into their land. After the war, and especially after the annexation of Korea in 1910, they figured Koreans were the same as the Japanese. The Chinese tried to figure out ways to get rid of us. Every May fifth (lunar calendar), they made rice cakes with sweet rice wrapped triangularly in bamboo leaves.⁸⁶ When a neighbor sent rice cakes over, the Koreans first threw one to the dogs. If the dog didn’t die, they remained friendly with their Chinese neighbor.

“There are many similarities between the Koreans and the Chinese. When I visited my Chinese neighbors’ houses, I saw looms and weaving equipment that looked very similar to what we used in Korea. The looms reminded me of my mother. She raised silk worms, pulled silk, weaved the thin strands and dyed it in delicate hues to make wedding blankets for her three daughters. Nowadays, people think that hand-knit sweaters are beautiful to look at, but troublesome to make. Knitting a sweater with factory-manufactured yarn for a few days is nothing compared to the old way of making clothes. Before we could even start cutting fabric to fashion into shirts or pants, we had to grow the cotton, comb it out, make thread, and weave it into cloth. How far we have come in technology these days.

“Whether Korean or Chinese, we were all under the power of Japan. Once the Chinese understood that we were in the same unfortunate situation, everything changed, yet again. My husband worked for a Japanese development/colonization

⁸⁶ Halmöni is talking about zongzi (粽子), dumplings eaten on Duanwujie (端午节), a festival celebrating the death of Qu Yuan (屈原), a Warring States poet who drowned himself to express his disgust with the corrupt government.

company (척식회사), collecting grain taxes in the countryside. He knew how difficult the situation was for everyone, including the Chinese. Because the Japanese officials didn't understand Chinese, my husband discreetly told the people in Chinese that they should not trust the Japanese when they say that there will be more food rations in exchange for more grain. He advised them to convert part of their house into a hidden granary and to hide a portion of their harvest for wintertime. These Chinese peasants knew that my husband was a good man who was risking his job for them, and they treated him well. Sometimes, when they slaughtered a pig, they gave my husband a hind leg. Every time he went on a business trip, he returned with some sort of meat. This was good for our family, because meat wasn't sold in the market during the war. (My husband told me after we returned to Korea that some of the Chinese farmers cried when he told them he was leaving because the war was over. They asked him not to leave and live with them in Manchuria.)

“I heard from some people who had just been in Korea that all of the churches were closed down, and the missionaries had all been forced to return to their countries. I didn't know this about Korea, because in Manchuria, there were still plenty of Korean churches, especially in northern Manchuria. I went every week to sing and pray to God. I was even part of the choice. Naturally, I assumed that Korean churches still existed.

“When I went to visit my parents in Korea, I found out that Abōji had stopped going to church after I left. The church was useless, he said. After the minister came back from prison, he couldn't preach anymore. He read parts of the Bible that were dictated by the police and sang hymns that hadn't been painted over with black ink.

When he saw that there were police coming near the church, he quickly ended the service with The Lord's Prayer and ran. Alas, these policemen weren't Japanese officers, but Korean. Koreans were betraying Koreans. Most of the American missionaries were being kicked out of the country, but because my village was very rural, we could afford to hide one or two missionaries. Many believers left the police controlled churches and resorted to going up mountains or into the woods for prayer meetings and Sunday services. Abōji was greatly disappointed in the weak will of the ministers: 'How can he retain his faith if the shepherd has failed his sheep?' Using his vegetable field as an excuse, he escaped the eyes of the police and was determined to keep his faith in God in his small hut.

“As time went by, the situation in Korea changed for the worse; now we weren't even allowed to use our own names. We were forced to change Korean names into Japanese ones, such as replacing Kim for Kanemoto (金本).⁸⁷ The Korean Independence Movement grew bigger towards the early 1940s. For example, in a nearby town called Jilin, there was a large Korean community that was very nationalistic and frequently held anti-Japanese demonstrations. Before I heard about the demonstrations in Jilin, I didn't really know about Japanese brutality or repression. Looking back, I resent my ignorance. I was never very interested in politics, so I didn't even realize that, at one point, the Korean language was forbidden to be spoken at all (even harsher than when I lived in Korea) and there were no more Korean books.

“Although numerous documents came to notify us that we had to change our names, we always had an excuse. Once, we told the Japanese officers that we were

⁸⁷ Hae-dong Yoon, Changssi-Gaemyong (창씨개명 創氏改名), 2000, Korean Studies Information Co., Ltd.

unable to change our surname, because my husband was away on a business trip, and he made all the major decisions. The next time they came, we stalled and lied that we were still in the process of deciding which surname should replace our own. This way, we somehow avoided having our name changed. Before they could notify us again, the city was bombed by the American forces. The bombs only fell on Japanese towns. However, to avoid stray bombs, all of the citizens of Mudanjiang fled the city.”

Chapter Three

Escape

“July 25, 1945. The siren wailed, signaling my turn at the watch post. Before leaving the house, I tied my newborn son to my back and strapped on the above-ankle military boots my husband had got for me. The streets were deserted. All of my neighbors had fled. I returned home and lay the baby down to sleep. Within an hour, my husband’s twenty-three year old nephew walked into the house. He was as confused as I was. I gave him my check book and asked him to withdraw all of our money from the bank. Then I sat, waiting for my husband to return from his business trip and take us away.

“A few hours later, my nephew came stumbling in with tattered clothes. Shocked, I asked him what happened. He told me that on his way to the bank, a bomb fell, crushing a brick house. He happened to be nearby and was crushed under the rubble. He was barely able to crawl out and come back to the house. Probably because of shock, he said he didn’t feel any pain as he returned the check book. We decided that staying in the house wasn’t safe, so we gathered a few things and went into the bomb shelter to wait for my husband.

“I don’t know how long we had been sitting inside the shelter, but gradually a few more women and their children entered. I overheard them say that men weren’t allotted seats on the train. My nephew was feeling a little ill and told me that he

would like to go home. I was left with my infant son and a few other women in the bomb shelter. Like me, they were waiting for their husbands. After two days of waiting, I finally went back home. I took some powdered grains, ointment, and a few cloth diapers and wrapped everything in a large piece of cloth. I grabbed an old, worn blanket and tied the baby more securely to my back. Another smaller blanket was used to shield his head from the debris. I was twenty-four years old and completely unaware of the terrors of war. I thought that I would surely come back to the house. If I had known beforehand how frightening war could be, I never would have walked out.

“At the train station, the passenger cars were reserved for the Japanese, and the cargo cars were left for the Koreans. We were so tightly packed; it reminded me of the bean sprouts I used to grow in a small kitchen basin. The Japanese soldiers grimly stood guard to make sure we boarded in a single-file, orderly fashion. I had no idea where this train was heading; I didn’t even know what time of the day it was. Suddenly, the train stopped, and we were told to get out. When I got off the train, I saw a crowd of people rushing to another train. The train engineer had connected the train engine to a different set of freight cars. I followed the crowd trying to squeeze in again, but it was impossible. Because the cars were already packed, no one helped me up, and I fell under the train. My son must have bumped into something when I fell, or it might have been out of shock of being jerked awake, because he started crying. I got up and tried again. This time I was successful. I was the last one to board the train. The ride didn’t last long, and we soon changed trains again.

“I knew I had to get on before everyone else. It was a month since I gave birth to my son, and having had nothing to eat for the past few days, my body was exhausted. I finally got on, sweating and out of breath. However, before I could fully catch my breath, we stopped to switch trains for a third time. I could no longer go on and let out a tearless sob. I looked around, helplessly, and saw that there was a woman sitting next to me with her baby. She couldn’t go on, either. I looked at her and said that I didn’t care where this train was going, but I refuse to move to another train. She looked at me blankly, but she must have felt the same way, for she didn’t move either.

“Despite my bold announcement to never get on another train, I somehow managed to find enough energy to crawl onto another car. As it started moving, I thought, ‘If this train heads back in the direction of Mudanjiang, I am going back to my house.’ However, the train headed in the opposite direction. The freight car I was in was used for transporting animals. The walls and bottom of the car were covered in horse urine and pig excrement. I held my son to my chest and looked for a relatively dry place to sit.

“The train stopped. I looked outside and saw that only a few people remained on the car. I began to get frightened. I was unwilling to remain on the train, but it had started moving again. Panicking, I looked around and noticed, with relief, that the train wasn’t empty. A few people had just boarded. I sat back down, and quietly listened to the newcomers talking. What I heard surprised me: Korea was now independent.”

At this point, I can't but wonder how Halmöni felt when she heard of Korea's independence; she had never known a free Korea. To her, Korea had always been a colony of Japan.

“The southern half of the peninsula was occupied by the Americans, while the north was occupied by the Soviets. I had no idea how these people got this information; even without radios or television, news spread at an alarming rate. After we heard of Korea's independence, there were Japanese soldiers with rifles walking around the trains, wistfully calling out to us, ‘You Koreans are lucky. You can go home now.’ Simultaneously, Soviet soldiers looked into trains and yelled, ‘Japan? Japan?’ indicating that the Japanese people should get off the trains and surrender. Somehow, the Japanese knew that their country had lost in the war. Furthermore, I was surprised to see that the [Japanese] women were wearing silk and cotton *hanbok* skirts. I saw them lay their babies down on their skirts. These women knew they would be harmed if the Soviet soldiers discovered them, so they had disguised themselves as Koreans.”

Qingdao

“The train stopped and crowds of Chinese people came to stare at the refugees. Out of nowhere, a young Korean man came over to me and said, ‘Auntie, don't be afraid of these people. Just follow them to their house and rest for a while.’ I found out that this place was called Chungdo.⁸⁸ In Chungdo, there were only two Korean

⁸⁸ Qingdao.

families. The young man who approached me was from one of those families; the other family was visiting Korea. He said that since the Koreans had always been kind to the Chinese, the Chinese wanted to reciprocate the benevolence by hosting the Korean refugees. Still, I was afraid.

“Nevertheless, I went with a Chinese couple to their home. At their house, I crouched in a corner with my baby. They let me be until dinner, when they offered me three ears of corn that was as long as my forearm. Then they offered me a place to spend the night. But because I was wary of their hospitality and afraid of missing the train, I insisted on going back to the station. Back on the train, I sat on the urine-stained floor and nodded off to sleep. The next morning, another group of Chinese villagers came to get us. Their morning ritual was foreign to me. Because water was so scarce, the entire family washed their faces in the same water; first the grandfather, then the father, the children, and lastly, the wife.

“When I was on the train again, I saw a group of Japanese soldiers conducting some sort of inspection. I was too tired and hungry to care, so I fell asleep. I was jerked awake by the soldiers who had come into our car. They started interrogating the woman next to me. Before, she had been holding a baby, but now the baby was gone. They were asking her where the baby was. They later found out that the woman had gone insane from the trauma of war and threw her baby out the window while the train was still moving. I was groggy and confused, but I strapped my baby even tighter against my body and folded my arms around him.

“That’s when I heard whizzing and then something exploding over my head. They were gunshots. The soldiers told me to get off the train. During the day, I had

only heard the bullets bouncing off the steel structure of the train, but now that it was dark, I could see little balls of fire hurtling too close to my body. I lay low to the ground under the train, holding onto my baby.

“I don’t know how long I was lying there, but I suddenly heard a voice from above me saying, ‘Auntie! Here, have something to eat.’ Then a pair of hands that must have belonged to the voice untied a bundle and pushed the contents near my face. They were rice balls. I hungrily took two. When I finally looked up, the hands had disappeared. After I ate the rice, I regained my strength. When I crawled out from my hiding place, I saw about twenty to thirty people heading somewhere down the road. I quickly went after them and blindly followed until sunset. They were walking along the train tracks, so I assumed they were going south. I hadn’t eaten anything except for the two rice balls for days, and my mind started to wander.

“The group came to a train station and decided to spend the night there. The next morning, they walked with the women and children in the center. The men stayed on the outside to protect the weak. I was grateful for this.

“Before we left the station, I filled up some water bottles that I had picked up on the way. Placing them down next to the people in the group, I went to use the restroom. When I came back, my water bottles were gone. The others told me that a couple of Soviet soldiers took them. I went in the direction they pointed to and saw the two soldiers with my bottles strapped to their backs. I ran up and yanked the bottles off of them, pushing them away from me. I do not know where this sudden burst of strength came from.

“I don’t understand a lot of things that happened during that time. In particular, it was strange that I always had enough milk for my baby. I didn’t have anything to eat or drink except water, but my breasts were always full. At times I even shared my milk with other babies whose mothers couldn’t produce any of their own.

“In the group, I was an outsider. While the other families shared food among themselves, I was never offered any. The other people carried some money with them, so they bought carts to ride on. I didn’t have any money, except my husband’s check book that was only redeemable at a bank. However, I managed to find a spot on the corner of a cart. Someone had attached four posts to either side of the cart to fit more luggage in the back; I sat on one of the posts.

“The roads were narrow and bumpy. It rained that day, and my clothes were soaking wet. The cart hit a bump on the road, and I lost my grip on the side of the cart. I fell off, but the carts went on without me. I walked behind the carts, straining to catch up. When I looked back, I saw that two Chinese men were following our group of refugees. I got scared and ran after the cart with all my might. Fortunately, the carts got stuck in a ditch not too far ahead, and I was able to catch up with the rest of the group. While the men tried to free the cart, I found a nice comfortable spot in the back.

“I felt especially thankful that I was on the cart when we started crossing a stream. The men who were walking on the sides got wet while the women and children on the carts were safe and dry. Further ahead, there was a house. On arrival, we found that all of the rooms had already been taken by other refugees. I found a

place under the roof, tried to squeeze the water out of the blanket and jacket, and then put it back on to dry by the heat from my body. The baby was surprisingly dry and comfortably sleeping.

“The next morning, we walked toward the tracks again. I was too slow and got left behind. My feet were covered in blisters; walking was painful. My legs couldn’t support my body weight anymore. In the end, I tripped over my own feet and fell into a rice paddy, soaking the blanket covering my baby. Luckily, it was hot and sunny. I took him off my back and bathed him in the paddy. No longer strapped to my back, he squealed with joy and squirmed around, kicking out his little legs. I placed him down on the grass while I wrung out his blanket. Then I strapped my son to my back again. I didn’t realize how heavy the blanket or the squirming infant on my back was; my only goal was to walk to my father’s house in Korea alive. The sun was setting, and the road was deserted. I walked on in the dark.”

Fengtian

“I walked on until I saw a sign that read ‘Bongch’un.’⁸⁹ I reached the train station and got on another train. Inside, a young woman was giving birth. The conditions were awful. Because no one had a knife or scissors to cut the umbilical cord, her father-in-law had to cut it with his teeth. Without any water to bathe the infant, they just covered him in a cotton blanket. When they got off the next station, the baby looked like a little lamb with white cotton stuck to his sticky body.

⁸⁹ Fengtian.

“There were so many people at the station. I stood, overwhelmed, in a corner of the waiting room until I finally lost consciousness. When I regained my senses, the people around me told me that I suddenly hugged a nearby post and cried out, ‘Ŏmōni! Mother! How am I to survive this?’ They gave me some water and told me to get a grip.

“Fortunately, I met my husband’s coworker and his family at the station. We asked each other where we were going. He told me that he was going back to Mudanjiang. When I heard this, I quickly gave him the check book and stamp⁹⁰ in hopes that he would eventually meet with my husband. When I finally met my husband, he told me he got the stamp, but there was no mention of a check book. The coworker must have taken the money for himself.

“On the following morning, Soviet soldiers stopped the train and asked if there were any Japanese on the train. Of course, the Japanese didn’t say anything, but some Koreans on the train pointed them out to the soldiers with a vengeance, ‘There they are! *Jjokbali nomdŭl*... Cleft-foot Japs... (a derogatory reference to the geta that Japanese people wore on their feet).’ When I saw the Japanese women and children being forced off the train, I forgot about my own pitiful situation and felt sorry for them. Once, I even saw a Japanese woman who was so hungry that she picked up a cigarette butt off the ground and ate it. It was during the time when a lot of Japanese girls had no other choice but to become concubines to rich Chinese men; it was a tragic end to the Japanese empire.”

⁹⁰ Instead of endorsing documents with handwritten signatures, in Asia, people use stamps carved with their name.

Siping

“The train crossed a river and arrived at a place called Sapyōngga.⁹¹

Everyone stuck their heads out of the windows, looking out at the railroad tracks.

When I looked out to see what everyone was staring at, I saw train compartments filled with people on their way back to Korea. Some were blindly staring, others had somehow made the T’aegŭkki⁹² and were waving it out the window. However, the Koreans weren’t the only ones who had become independent from Japanese rule; the Chinese were also on the train, heading home to China.

“I couldn’t find a place to sit, so I tightly strapped my son to the front of my body and squatted down on the chain link between two cars, holding on to some of the luggage. The luggage constantly shifted with the train’s movement, and I was afraid that I might fall off the chain. If the bags had been larger and heavier, holding on would have posed a lesser problem, but the luggage compartment was full of small suitcases and cloth sacks that slid all over the car. Some time later, a Chinese man was trying to help me by holding onto my arm, but I felt uncomfortable. Female propriety was so well ingrained in me, that even when this man was trying to save my life, I was inching back, desperately trying to avoid his grip. When I looked down, not only were my clothes damp with sweat, but the baby was also soaked in sweat; my struggling was tiring him out. I tried to relax a little, but I still felt very uneasy.

“I don’t know how long it had been since we had crossed the Korean border, but the train was so overcrowded that there was no room for me to feed the baby. It

⁹¹四平街

⁹²[South] Korean flag

was around mid-August, and the sun was scorching. Without protection, the baby's delicate skin was badly sunburned. He had tiny blisters all over his small face. I remembered that I had brought some ointment with me when I left Manchuria, so I applied it to his blisters. In a few days, the blisters healed and turned into scabs. But not long after, when I was holding him in my arms, a man in front of me was nodding off to sleep, and his head bumped into my son's face, ripping off the scabs. I couldn't even blame the man. We were so crowded that it was impossible not to bump into each other. I cried to myself as I applied more ointment to my son's bleeding face, miserably imagining how much his face must hurt. Fortunately, the ointment must have been soothing; the baby stopped whimpering and fell back asleep. Eventually, his face scabbed over again and healed without scarring."

Manpojin

"The train stopped again at a place called Manpojin. When all the passengers got off, the train went back to China. Everyone sat down on the cement floor of the station, exhausted. There were Soviet soldiers everywhere. They told us that there was going to be another train heading for Seoul, and until then, they were there to protect the women and children.

"During the day, the soldiers scanned the crowds for young women, and at night, they dragged the women away and returned them by morning. I wasn't very beautiful, but I was young at heart, and I was afraid that the soldiers would eventually take me too. I found a puddle of dirty, muddy water and splashed it all over my face. My hair already resembled a bird's nest, because it had rained many times, and I

hadn't washed it for so long; only God knows what was living in my hair. With my face caked in mud and clay, I looked hideously ugly. Seeing this, one young girl came up to me and begged me to sit on her all day. I suppose she thought that because this woman is so ugly, no soldier would want to come near her. All day and all night, I roosted on top of her like a mother hen.

“The sun fell, and the soldiers came around to start their draft of women. There was an old woman in front of me with a white shawl over her head. The soldiers tried to carry her off. The old woman started to bawl in terror and frightened the soldier. He shined his flashlight at her face to show that she was old and missing teeth. He quickly let go of her and even helped her put the shawl back over her head. He tried to cajole her to stop her crying by cooing, ‘Shh! Shh!’ and ran away.

“Sometimes, husbands wouldn't let go of their wives' hands. Whenever this happened, the soldiers would stick their swords and rifles in their faces and threaten to shoot. Then I saw the husbands, one by one, letting go. That's when my will to live became more resolute; even the women with husbands couldn't avoid danger. From this point of view, I wasn't at much of a disadvantage. The women who returned in the morning came back, unable to walk. When the military police came by, the Soviets pretended to care for us. I spent two days in fear.

“Before we boarded the next train, everyone received a small ration of barley. I found a cloth sack to put my barley in and placed it on the train as I got ready to board, but the man yelled out that the car was full and kicked me off the train. When I looked around for my sack of barley, it was lying in a puddle on the ground. So many people had already stepped on it in the short period of time that it became a

paste. It being no longer edible, I was forced to throw away the only food I'd had for a long time.

“The train left without me. A man next to me told me that although the train I'd missed didn't go straight to Seoul, there would be no more trains. I'd have to walk to the next station to catch a train. I didn't have the strength to walk anymore. I sat down on the tracks and cried.

“It was a moon-lit night. If I hadn't been alone, dirty, and utterly exhausted, I might have considered it beautiful. Out of the dark, three young students ran towards me and cried, ‘Auntie! Why are you crying? Korea is independent now! We are free!’ I wondered how they could have so much energy. Another boy said, ‘My house is near Chebudong. It's not far from here. You should come and rest there for a while.’ One boy took off his wooden sandals and placed them on my feet. Then he took the baby from my back, and the other two supported me by holding my arms. I thought, ‘God must have heard my cried and sent angels to me.’

“The boys told me that they had been drafted into the Imperial Army and had been on their way to some place that sounded like Jijihatu.⁹³ They said it was a big city. On their way there, Japan surrendered and Korea was independent, which meant that the boys were free to go. (When the Japanese draft boys into the military, they put on a great performance in their honor to persuade them of the glory of fighting for Japan.) After walking for a while, they pointed to a building in the distance, ‘Auntie, there's another train station ahead.’

“When we reached the station, they left me and went their own way. Not even an hour had passed when the boys returned, ‘Auntie, we can spend the night

⁹³I think it's 齐齐哈尔 Qiqihaer in Heilongjiang province

here, together, and take the next train in the morning.’ There were already a lot of people sleeping at the small station. I nodded off to sleep with my son in my arms. In the morning, I couldn’t find the three boys. Because it had been dark when I met them, I never got the chance to see what they looked like; I only knew their voices. They didn’t know what I looked like either, so we had no choice but to part at the station.

“The train never arrived, so I started walking again. I was still young (only 25) and didn’t notice that my legs were tired. However, after walking a few miles, my feet started to swell up, and walking became difficult. The sandals the boy gave me were too heavy, and I eventually discarded them. Walking barefoot was worse. I began walking on the sides of my feet because the soles of my feet were tender and bleeding.

“Another day ended, and it became night. I saw a bridge in front of me. When I looked over the tracks, I could see a black ribbon of water reflecting the moon below me.⁹⁴ A thought suddenly came to my head, ‘Ah! So this is where I could die together with my son.’ I got ready to jump, but stopped. I became aware that my son was tied to my back, which meant that there was a possibility that I might hit the water first and die instantly, while my son stayed alive. I didn’t want to make him an orphan, so I untied him from my back and tied him to the front. I paused again – what if my son were to hit the water first and die from the impact while I stayed alive? Hysterically, I tied my son to the front, then to the back, then to the front again. Finally, I gave up and got ready to jump.

⁹⁴ It must have been Taedong River.

“Suicide is a greater sin!” A voice rang in my ear. I looked around but saw no one. I thought to myself, ‘I must be losing my mind.’ Then I got ready to jump again. Somehow, my son’s eyes came in contact with mine. He smiled brightly at me. He was a little more than a month old. It is uncommon for infants that young to smile. Simultaneously, I heard the same voice, *Suicide is a greater sin!*

“My son’s smile and the strange voice jerked me back from the darkness I was in. My mind flashed back to one particular Sunday school class. That day, we had learned about heaven and hell. The teachers told the children that the afterlife was eternal. If I went to heaven, I would be in eternal glory, but if I went to hell, I would be in eternal pain. When I heard the teacher, I didn’t even know what ‘eternal’ meant. She told me it meant a very long time – I would see all the mountains of Korea wear away. Then I knew how long ‘eternal’ was. I grew afraid.

“Focusing back on the bridge, I remembered that this was a world war; I wasn’t the only one suffering. There were soldiers, men, women, and even children being killed. I hadn’t been killed; my son was still alive; and my husband was out there, somewhere, looking for me. I strapped my son to my back, not to jump, but to continue walking. At the time, I didn’t think about the voice again, but now, I feel that it had been God’s voice calling out to me, telling me not to jump.

“I arrived at another station. People were waiting for the train to Seoul. When the train finally came, we learned that it was scheduled to leave the next day. Meanwhile, I was looking for something to eat, and instead, I found a soldier’s tin cup. Earlier that day, we had been given another ration of barley. I wanted to cook the barley, but I couldn’t find any water. Too many people were sitting around the

well, and it was impossible to squeeze through. I looked around until I found a small puddle near a stream. It looked clear and drinkable, so I used it to cook the barley. I collected a few stones and dry branches and managed to light a small fire. The barley we were given is similar to the oatmeal we eat these days for breakfast – the oatmeal in a red and blue paper container with a smiling man on it – only, the barley cooked faster. I had no salt, and the barley was very bland. Worse, the cooked barley had a muddy smell and taste. I couldn't swallow any of it. I later saw that the water I had used looked clear because the algae growing underneath had reflected some blue color into the water. It was actually muddy and stagnant. Reluctantly, I threw the barley out. Instead, I asked someone to give me a cup of water.”

Pyongyang

“The train arrived in the morning, and I barely made it on. It was another freight train. It had no food. The train went through a tunnel so long that approximately twenty minutes passed before we saw light again. Some families had blankets to cover themselves with to try to prevent the coal smoke billowing out of the back from the engine from getting into their lungs. Others had umbrellas. I didn't have anything. I tore a small piece of fabric from of my son's shirt and wet it with my mouth. I placed this over my son's mouth and nose to protect his lungs, but I didn't have anything; I wheezed and panted in the dark.

“In the distance, I saw a tiny pinprick of light. That light grew larger until it became the tunnel exit, and the train was finally out. I looked down at my baby and saw that he was sleeping peacefully. The cloth covering his nose and mouth was

black. Everyone looked around and laughed. We were all covered in soot. We hadn't brushed our teeth for more than a month, but compared to our faces, they were pearly white.

“The train stopped for a while, and the people got off the train to wash the soot off in a nearby stream. I didn't have any soap, so when I tried to wash off my face, the soot turned into a tar-like, black, sticky mess. My face became blacker, as if I had painted myself intentionally with ink. I had no mirror and couldn't see whether or not my face was clean.

“Once again, the train stopped at Pyongyang. This train didn't go to Seoul either. It was Sunday. The churches that had been closed during the Occupation were now open, and the people of Pyongyang joyfully carried their Bibles to the newly opened churches. I was envious of them and felt sorrowful thinking that the Ŭisŏng church would also be open, that my friends and family would go to church without me.

“There were a lot of people at the Pyongyang station. They were from many different places – Northern Manchuria, Southern Manchuria, and other cities in Northeast China. Those from Northern Manchuria had traveled the farthest and looked worse than beggars. In contrast, those who came from Southern Manchuria were the cleanest and most handsome refugees. I was one of the northern Manchurian refugees; I had no shoes, no money, and no family.

“At the station, I saw two Japanese soldiers committing seppuku. They kneeled down, facing east, and yelled out ‘Tennō Heika! (天皇陛下)’ three times before plunging their swords into their stomachs. I briefly thought, ‘Their country

lost the war, and they have no place to go, so they must have chosen death.’ Even having witnessed two gruesome suicides, I was unmoved. I had seen much worse. The only thing that preoccupied my mind was the thought of going home to see my family - *If I ever die, I have to at least get to Taegu*. My family would know of my death because a lot of Ŭisŏng people lived in Taegu.

“Pyongyang station had trains full of military goods. Koreans who had lived in Manchuria were all coming back to Korea after independence. When they arrived at the station, they raided these trains, took out military boots, jackets, pants, and whatever else they could find and distributed them among themselves. Someone handed me a pair of leather boots, but I couldn’t wear them. Not only did they not fit, they were too heavy. I tied the laces together and slung the boots over my shoulders, but eventually, I had to throw them away. There were also sacks of sugar. I was sitting next to the sugar sack, but when the people found out there was sugar, they swarmed over, stepping on my legs and feet. I didn’t have a chance to get any of the sugar for myself, but someone was kind enough to give me a handful of theirs. No one had containers, so everyone fought over military helmets to use instead.

“I took the train from Pyongyang to Kaesŏng, then walked to Seoul. It had rained and the roads were slippery. There were no soldiers in sight. I walked along the ditch and fell a few times. I had to pass a tunnel. Other families had candles to guide them, but I had nothing. I felt my way along the tunnel wall. It’s amazing how many stakes were in the ground. I fell so many times that I can’t remember walking ten feet before falling again. When I was thirsty, I used my hands to catch the dripping water; it was very cool and refreshing. My face was covered with so much

charcoal dust that I probably wouldn't have recognized myself in the mirror. I didn't care; my only goal was to walk to Seoul and keep my baby safe.

"I don't know how far I've walked. On the way, I saw women with jars of water on their heads. They were giving water to the refugees. It was warm tap water; I couldn't bear drinking it. In Manchuria, the water was cool mountain water and very refreshing. But the tap water being offered by these women was lukewarm; it did nothing to quench my thirst.

"We came to the Imjin River and got ready to cross. If we gave about 150,000W,⁹⁵ we could take the boat all the way to Mapo⁹⁶, but I didn't have any money. I didn't know what to do. How could I have come all the way here and not be able cross? Just then, a young man told me that there was another way across the bridge, but we would have to get on a rickety cart on the steel railway, over the river. He offered to carry my bundle of diapers and told me that he would return it to me when I crossed myself. At least I didn't have to carry bags. It was night and we all stood in line to cross the bridge. The moon lit our way. I only had to worry about carrying the baby, so I felt much better. Luckily, the baby wet his diaper only a little and slept most of the time while we waited. At times, I let him down and massaged his legs before I strapped him on again. Once I got on the cart to cross the bridge, he didn't even cry for milk and slept.

"In retrospect, everything was a miracle, but I didn't know how to thank God for giving me strength. All I knew how to do was to call out to my mother and cry."

⁹⁵ Approximately \$50.

⁹⁶ District within Seoul city.

Journey Home

“It was my turn to start walking toward the cart. I was terrified. It was a narrow track that had no railing to protect us from falling over into the river. I was carefully sidling my way toward the cart, when a little girl in front of me slipped and fell. Luckily, her skirt had caught on a nail, and she dangled over the edge. Her father carefully pulled her up, and they continued walking. Just then, I heard another splash, and another. People were falling in left and right; some were pushed in by other people’s bundles, and others slipped because it was too dark. When I neared the end of the tracks, the young man who had been carrying my bundle supported me by the hand and cried, ‘Auntie, you were very brave! Good luck!’ As soon as we finished crossing, he waved goodbye and left.

“My feet were raw and covered with blisters. The skin on the bottom of my feet was rubbed so much that red flesh was beginning to show. But all I could think of was getting home, and I somehow managed to reach the gate of Severance Hospital in Seoul. The hospital was in front of the Seoul train station, and there was already a huge crowd gathering in front. (I believe this hospital was founded by missionaries. Back then it was called Severance Hospital, but now it’s a hospital run by Yonsei University.) In front of the hospital, someone was handing out rice balls to the incoming refugees. I gratefully received two and started eating. The sun went down and it got colder. They told me that the day after tomorrow was Chusŏk.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ A major Korean holiday, celebrating the harvest and giving thanks for the bounty of the earth – basically a Korean Thanksgiving. Chusŏk usually falls in September of the solar calendar.

“The refugees tore down the wooden fence around the hospital and built great bonfires for warmth. I went near a fire and warmed myself. Two days later, it still wasn’t my turn to board the train. I held onto my train ticket, my ticket to heaven. Sitting in the hospital yard, I was reminded of springtime in Manchuria, when the opium addicts would wheel cartfuls of more than a dozen corpses to dump in a nearby river. These men had died without money and without every being married. I had cheated death to come all the way to Korea.⁹⁸ There were some who were better off than me, and then there some that didn’t survive the journey. I sat there, musing about the different fates of mankind, thinking back to the time when I lived peacefully in Manchuria.

“There were some Japanese and Chinese people at Seoul station. They had come to Korea in a smuggling boat. There were so many people at that station, you can truly say that the people formed mountains and oceans (人山人海).

“I ate two rice balls a day and after three days of waiting, I finally left to walk to another train station to wait for the next train. I was pushed into the waiting room of the station, and after a while, I forced my way through to the ticket gate of the boarding station. After they took my ticket, I once again pushed through the crowd to go down the stairs to the train. When I was going down, I kept thinking to myself, Pay attention! If I fall, the people are going to walk all over my baby and me!

“As I waited for the train to come, my thoughts wandered back to the time I was still stuck on a train in Manchuria. I was squeezed to the side of a cargo car with the baby strapped to the front of my body. My body moved whenever the luggage

⁹⁸ Halmöni expressed this as “九死一生,” meaning that one almost dies nine times, but ultimately, survives, but just barely.)

moved. Even in that chaotic situation, I fell asleep. I woke when I heard the baby cry, so I placed him against my chest to feed him. But the baby wouldn't stop crying. When I looked down, the baby had fallen down, and I was holding his feet to my breast! Alarmed, I quickly picked him up and placed him against my chest and strapped him tighter to my body. Despite this my eyelids grew heavy again and I fell asleep.

“The train finally arrived. I ran up to one of the cars and found that the train was packed. A man stood at the entrance and stuck out his arms and legs to prevent more people from getting on. He said that the car was too full and there's no room for another person. Once, in Manchuria, I was hanging on the side of a train to force myself up, but fell off when someone kicked at my hand. I didn't want my hand to be kicked, so I tried begging the man, instead, ‘Please, sir, if I don't get on this train, I'll die!’ The man harshly said there was no way for him to let me on.

“It was hopeless. When I thought of my child, I grew more dejected. Abruptly, from under the man's straddled legs, a hand reached out to me and a man's voice said, ‘Auntie, grab my hand and come on the train.’ I grabbed his hand and climbed onto the train. Looking around, I saw that the car was far from full. In fact, there were only a few people sitting in the car. The man who pulled me up told me, ‘Auntie, you can sit on top of the sweet potato sack,’ and went his way. Sitting atop the sweet potato sack, my buttocks were getting really sore; the sweet potatoes dug into my skin. I'm guessing that because it was the day before Chusŏk, the farmers had dug up their sweet potatoes to sell in Seoul. I got off the sack and stood, leaning against it. The baby was soundly asleep, as usual.

“I was wide awake, trying to imagine arriving at Taegu, then Yongchun, and finally Üisöng. Also, because I had eaten rice balls at the hospital yard, I wasn’t hungry, either. I was feeling relatively comfortable and hopeful for the first time since the day I was crouched in the bomb shelter in Mudanjiang.

“As the train neared Taegu, an old woman near me looked at my dirty face and told me to wash up, pointing to a bucket of water. I had no idea how dirty my face was, and frankly, I didn’t care. All I looked forward to was getting to Taegu. A young woman who heard the old lady said crossly, in my defense, ‘Leave her alone. She must have traveled a long time to get here. Give her some peace.’ Then she turned to me and asked, ‘I heard that you’re coming from Manchuria. Are you by any chance Kim Sung-woon’s wife?’ I thought I had heard wrong. After going through so much, could I really be hearing my husband’s name? When I replied that I was, she cried, ‘Oh! You must have gone through so much! Don’t you worry; the next station is Taegu station. We’ll get off there, together.’ I was dazed, but I had enough sense to nod my head. The train finally stopped, and I got off absentmindedly; it was strange to be back in such a familiar place.

“I went to the waiting room and ran into the young man who had helped me cross at Imjin River. At first I didn’t recognize him, but it appears that he recognized my face. He handed me an apple and said hello. When I finally recognized him, I was overjoyed. We joyfully greeted each other, and I split the apple, giving him the larger piece. I rummaged through my pockets and found 5W. I bought some rice cakes for the young man. When I gave the peddler 5W, he handed me five cakes that were as big as my forearm. I thought that I wouldn’t need any for myself because I

will be at home soon. However, at his urging, I took one and gave him the rest. Then I asked him where he was headed to, and he named a city that was a little further than my own hometown, Üisǒng. I asked him if he could give me his address so that when I got home, I could visit him with my father to thank him for his help. He just smiled and evaded my questions.

“We got on the train to Üisǒng, and while the young man and I were talking, the train arrived at its destination. I was distressed because the young man wouldn’t tell me his address, but I had no choice but to get off the train. Other than that, I was overjoyed that our country had finally gained its independence. But most importantly, I was going to see my parents and siblings.”

Home

“I looked like a beggar. I had no shoes, tattered clothes, and dirty face. There were many Üisǒng people at the station waiting for their relatives who were coming from China. Despite my dirty, matted hair and black face, my eyes were unaffected and I immediately recognized who some of them were. However, they did not recognize me. I started walking in the direction of my parent’s house. People that I knew passed me and stared, walking on without knowing who the dirty woman with the baby was. On the way, I passed a woman from the Üisǒng church who peered into my face, recognized who I was, then ran to my house screaming, ‘Your daughter is back! Your daughter is back!’

“My mother had been going to the station for the past few weeks to see if she could find me in the crowd of newly arriving refugees. This day would be no

different. She was getting ready to leave when she heard the deacon's yells. I was embarrassed and tried to hide from the neighbors. I strapped the baby to my back and put the sack of diapers on my head, screening my face. A little while later, my mother finally heard the news and ran towards me. She saw me, but I was so bedraggled and dirty that she just ran past me heading for the station. The deacon was running behind my mother and yelled at her, 'Where are you going? You just passed your daughter!' She dragged my mother by the hand and led her back to me. Meanwhile, I walked steadily towards the house that I had grown up in. At last, I reached the front gates and sat on the edge of the threshold. I was sure this was all a dream.

"My mother came back to the house and looked at me, tears silently running down her now wrinkled face. She had aged a lot since the last time I saw her. After crying, my mother came back to her senses and came over to me. She briskly untied my son from my body and called over my younger siblings. My sister was still unmarried. She and my brother were back from Osaka, Japan where they had been studying (my brother was studying medicine) because the bombings had been too severe. My sister picked up the baby, bathed him, and let him down to sleep in the living room.

"My mother prepared a bath for me, and for the first time in over a month, I washed myself. They took our clothes and put everything in a pot of boiling water; they had to kill the fleas and other parasites that I had contracted from the Chinese refugees on the train. The Chinese people in Manchuria rarely ever bathed, even when it wasn't wartime, so they always had fleas on their bodies. Chinese fleas were

as big and black as the ones found on pigs and cows. My clothes smelled strongly of sweat and dirt – my clothes were stained with lime deposits and parasites from two months of rain, sun, and traveling in dirty trains. Although I had fleas, I didn't even feel itchy. I was so intent on survival that I never noticed my blood being sucked out. Itching is a leisurely activity. While I was bathing, my sister's job was to take out the fleas and lice out of my hair. There were multiple parasites on each strand of hair.

“My father worked in the vegetable garden. The church had been long-closed, and the Japanese had been busily drafting men into their army. Strong, young men were sent to the battlefield and the middle-aged men were forced to do odd jobs in the military camps. My father and one of my older brother's friends, named Oh Dal-su, were the only two deacons left from the church. Oh Dal-su betrayed us and told the Japanese who they should and shouldn't conscript, in exchange for money. Because he helped them, the Japanese made Oh Dal-su the village head. My father closed his jewelry shop and made his living farming and selling vegetables. Next to the field, he built a small mud brick structure, where he would read the Bible at night and hide it under a clay jar during the daytime.

“Even vegetables were taken away as tax by the Japanese. They took everything that was fresh and left the inedible, sickly crops. Oh Dal-su amassed a lot of wealth and didn't fear anything (except perhaps the failure of the Japanese empire). Right before Independence, he choked on a persimmon and died. In his youth, he had been morally upright and hardworking at church, but in the end, he died before his country gained its independence. What a pity.

“My father still worked in the field after Independence. When he heard that I had returned from Manchuria, he sent a message back saying that if only my son-in-law and his family were to return to Korea safely, he would not be in want.

“After I left Manchuria, my elder brother searched everywhere to find me. Starting from Fengtian, he went to every city in northern Manchuria looking for me. When I got off at Fengtian station on my way to Korea, there was a crowd of people leisurely coming out of the village theater, with no idea that Manchuria was being bombed. My brother later told me that in his town, Soviet soldiers randomly entered people’s homes and captured all the women. Some tried to get into his house. He didn’t know how to speak Russian, but he had heard that the word ‘kepi’ meant military police. He came out the house, yelling, ‘Kepi! Kepi!’ and sure enough, the intruders ran away. I’m not sure whether or not the military police were as vile as the rest of the Soviet soldiers, but I do know that the Soviet soldiers feared the military police.

“My brother carried three days worth of food with him and wandered around, looking for me. While my brother was in Fengtian, he met our younger brother who had been drafted into the army. There, they heard that Japan had been defeated and joyfully returned to Korea together. On their way out, they ran into the daughter of a high-ranking Japanese official. She sobbed and begged them to take her with them, but they had to refuse because there was no guarantee that she would be safe, even with them. They reluctantly turned her away and told her to return to her family.

“A few days after returning to my parents’ house in Korea, I began to feel the after-effects of traveling. I didn’t want to worry my parents, but my body eventually broke down. For two days I was unable to move a finger.

“That same year, the fall harvest was plentiful. It was the first time, in a long time, that Koreans could farm their land and eat their harvest without having to give it up as tax to the Japanese.”

Reunion

“Approximately six months passed before my husband and in-laws arrived in Korea. We were all thrilled to be reunited. Whereas my journey was a near-death experience, my in-laws arrived without much trouble, riding comfortably south on a train with their three sons. As soon as my mother-in-law saw me, she started to berate me for leaving by myself. She said I should have at least written something on the wall informing the family of my departure. I told her that I had been waiting in the bomb shelter for more than two days for someone to get me, but my husband didn’t return from his trip, everyone else had gone to visit my sister-in-law, and all of the neighbors had already fled. Although I had no choice but to leave, my mother-in-law accused me of leaving to save my own skin.

“Around the time I left Manchuria, there were Japanese soldiers going from house to house, telling all the women to come out for bomb drills. When we heard sirens during dinner, we all dropped our spoons and ran out to our posts. If someone was late for duty, the soldiers kicked and yelled at the poor woman. The day I left, I had thought that it was another drill and took my baby with me to hide in the shelter

for two days. My mother-in-law knew that I probably had no other choice, but she refused to be satisfied by my hesitant explanations.

“My mother-in-law had gone to visit her daughter in the countryside, and my two brothers-in-law were still in school. When they heard about the bomb raid, the two brothers had come home to check on me. When they didn’t see me, they send a message to their mother not to come home and headed to their sister’s house. After everyone had gathered at that house, they started selling the harvested vegetables and grain to buy train tickets to Korea.

“They took the left-over money and rented a small one-room house in Taegu. Everyone slept in the same room. My son started crawling. Every morning we had rice gruel. Our landlady was a widow. I didn’t want her to see that we were eating gruel. (Gruel is only for sick or poor people who cannot afford to eat rice.) She came in one morning to ask me a question. At that moment, the rice gruel started boiling over. I tried to ignore it, but in the end I had to open the lid and give it a stir. The landlady asked me why I was making gruel in the morning. She thought that we had brought a lot of money from Manchuria. Although we had money, no one was employed, and with six mouths to feed we were trying to be frugal with our rice.

“One day, the three brothers went into the mountains to gather firewood. Out of the three men, my husband, as the eldest brother, worked the most. They borrowed a hand cart from my father and went into the woods. But because they had only had a little rice gruel in the morning, they didn’t have enough energy to bring the wood back. Someone came by our house to tell us that there were three young men lying next to a wood cart. Even when my mother-in-law and I heard the news, we didn’t

know what to do. Even if we went, it wasn't as if we were bringing them food. So we made some more rice gruel and sat at home, waiting for their return. They came back after sunset.

“Market day was every two and five days. Everyone came to buy and sell odds and ends. People who lived near the ocean brought sea urchins, seaweed, fish, and baby sharks to sell. There was time when I saw the seafood and wanted so much to eat it that I became sick for one day.

“My husband somehow found a business partner to start a sports equipment store in Taegu. Our situation was still bad, but our rice gruel had improved a little; instead of just rice and water, we now added bean leaves or scallions. It was so tough to eat, but my teeth were still good, so I didn't complain.

“1946, June 25. My son's first birthday.

“My legs were still hurting from a year ago. At night, I hung my baby's carrying cloth on a nail and slept with my feet in the air. I didn't even know that it was my son's birthday until my younger brother and elder sister visited our house with a small sack of rice and seaweed. (Seaweed soup is the customary birthday soup.) They asked us if we had anything for breakfast yet; if not, they brought some food for Hong-jin-i's (my son) birthday. They wished me good health before leaving.

“We had two wooden crates in the house. One was for rice and one was for clothes. We didn't have clothes; besides the baby's diapers and shirt, the crate was empty. I only had the linen pants I wore when fleeing Manchuria and the stiff cotton

skirt my mother gave me when I came back. My mother was shorter than I was, so the skirt only came to my shins. It looked like I was getting ready for a flood.

“A few months before my husband’s family and I were reunited, a few people from the youth organization came to tell me that I could choose any house that the Japanese officials had been living in. They said I was most eligible because I had gone through the most hardship. I rejected the offer. It didn’t feel right that I take someone else’s house, and a Japanese house at that.

“We moved to another, more spacious house. The only downside was that the house was right behind a threshing factory where rice was processed. It was so loud that when the machine was on, we would shout everything. When the machine was turned off, we spoke in our normal voices again. Every time this happened, we looked at each other and laughed.

“Once, the factory owner’s son went into his room to sleep, but there was something cold at his feet. He looked under the covers and found a snake coiled up. Screaming, he ran out of his room. His father put some rice into a cloth sack and lured the snake in. They tied it, and instead of throwing it away, they dubbed it the protecting god of the house and took care of it. People can be so superstitious and strange...”

Reflection

“Now that I was leaving in relative peace and reunited with my family, I started to think back on the events of the past year. I could not understand how such awful, yet miraculous things had happened to me; the Korean soldier who gave me

the rice balls in the midst of heavy fire; the voice I heard when I was about to jump off the bridge; the mysterious young man who helped me carry my sack when I was crossing the Imjin River; the big hand that pulled me up into the train; the baby never cried even when he had soiled his diaper, but slept most of the time. I couldn't imagine all the diapers I would have had to throw away if the baby had heavily soiled his diaper, but he never did, and thankfully I never ran out of diapers. These events have puzzled and amazed me for the past sixty years, and I believe that it was with the help of God that I made it out alive from Manchuria.”

Chapter Four

While listening to Halmōni tell me about her life during the period in which Korea was under Japanese rule, I was surprised that her stories lacked the usual poisonous resentment Koreans have against the Japanese. Instead, she spoke of the camaraderie, curiosity, and even pity that the Koreans felt for the Japanese; they were neighbors, comical cultural enigmas, and friendly competition to the Koreans. Halmōni reserved her ill feeling for fellow Koreans, especially those who served as underdogs to the Japanese colonial police.⁹⁹

Halmōni's general unawareness of the political situation and unexpected responses regarding national betrayal and survival roused my curiosity; what was the difference between Halmōni and the other Koreans that I have encountered? With these questions in mind, I intend to analyze the differences between Halmōni's personal encounters with the Japanese and the stories of injustice and hatred told to me by older generations. I will also look at the key factors, such as the Korean media and political manipulation, that played (and are still playing) significant roles in promoting anti-Japanese sentiment among the Korean population.

Since the late nineteenth century, relations between Korea and Japan have rarely been friendly, particularly during the thirty-five years when Korea was a Japanese colony. However, it is important to note that the threat of national division

⁹⁹ Halmōni wasn't the only one who was disgusted with the corruption of the Korean government; my uncle was so embittered that he said, "I refuse to even piss in the direction of Korea" as he immigrated to Canada.

in the latter half of the 1940s overshadowed the issue of Korean-Japanese relations. It was not until the Korean government created a biased perspective, reporting unverified stories about the Japanese government's plan to reconquer Korea that they succeeded in briefly shifting the focus from national division to a vigorous purging of anything and everything that reminded them of the painful colonial period. However, anti-Japanese sentiment still lingers, affecting the lives of all Koreans.

My parents and grandparents lived in Korea when the government's anti-Japanese propaganda was at its peak, instilling in them prejudices towards all things Japanese. Despite being raised in America, I sometimes find myself feeling that same prejudice. I was raised by Korean parents who, when buying a VCR, grudgingly picked up a Sony because of the company's good reputation, muttering under their breaths, "Damn those Japanese" or "Why aren't the Koreans outperforming the Japanese?"

With this kind of reinforcement, I imagined the Japanese as evil, conniving people who tried to destroy Korean culture, killed thousands of innocent people – although I could not deny that they made good cars and electronics. Among other young Korean Americans, "Japan bashing" was a common activity. However, I gradually realized that I lacked a concrete reason for my hostility. What do we really know about the past? Why are the younger generations, born and raised in a foreign country, harboring the same ill-will of their parents? What was the basis for Koreans' anti-Japanese sentiment?

Having a less-than-substantial reason for being biased against another culture and people has caused much confusion and misunderstanding: when people asked me

why the Koreans hated the Japanese, I could only give them a hesitant account of a vague war and the wrongs done to “our ancestors.” Furthermore, each time I went to Japan to visit relatives, I noticed a serious inconsistency between the brutal killers of my imagination and the simple and friendly people that I encountered. I recognized the need to avoid the path that the older Korean generations took, a path of blind historical prejudice and misinformation; I resolved to study Korean history and culture in relation to Japan in a objective environment, away from the prejudiced sources at home.

This is not an attempt to claim the superiority of my own analysis over existing scholarly views; it is merely an observational exercise in which I am comparing the popular belief of absolute Japanese brutality and wickedness in colonial Korea to Halmöni’s experiences during that time. Because this analysis is based on only one person’s personal account of a historical event, there could be great disparity between her memories and other accounts due to differences in location, religious beliefs, and time period.¹⁰⁰ However, despite these disparities, Halmöni’s story provides a voice of authority with a unique perspective through which one will realize that history is more than the consensus narrative created by scholars following a national discourse; it is the tapestry of countless individuals lives, in which Halmöni’s is only a part.

¹⁰⁰ My observations may offend older generations who would see me as part of a younger generation of students who think that their university education is superior to the experiences of the people who actually survived the time period; the book-smart, know-it-all youngster who seeks to criticize her elders and try to take a so-called neutral view of past events, gliding over the injustices, justifying Japanese actions by blaming them on inescapable circumstance.

Media and Politics

Nearly four decades of Japanese colonialism left Korea with a deeply imbedded antagonism toward Japan, resulting in a fervent nationalism. However, Korean politicians played these sentiments to their personal advantage by using policies and the media as a tool in their power struggle, distorting the truth and presenting unconfirmed information to the public.

Political Manipulation

Contrary to popular belief, not everyone in Korea showed the same level of fixed hostility toward the Japanese during the colonial period. Some took advantage of the Japanese provisional government in Korea to look after their personal interests, others were too ignorant to know or care.¹⁰¹ Even among those who did have strong anti-Japanese sentiments, not all of their grievances were selflessly patriotic, driven by concern about Korea's welfare. Ironically, it was post-1945, after the Japanese had already left Korea, that anti-Japanese sentiment reemerged; this became a rallying point around which the government forged a new national identity.

The Korean government manipulated whatever negative feelings the public had toward the Japanese and turned it into a national issue. In particular, the media was the government's tool to briefly redirect the focus from the national division and anti-Communist discourses to anti-Japanese and anti-U.S. sentiments. When it came

¹⁰¹ "Those few [Koreans] who pretend to cooperate [with the Japanese] have their own motives, seeking information and strategic positions for future usefulness." Nym Wales (1942), "Rebel Korea," p. 26.

to issues about Japanese maltreatment of Korean residents in Japan, Korean parties of all political views were unanimous in expressing their indignation.¹⁰²

Anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea was renewed in the late 1940s because of the politicians' hidden agenda of partisan politics. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the first Korean president, Dr. Syngman Rhee, manipulated anti-Japanese sentiment to divert a mounting insurrection among political groups and focus their energies on the primary issue of unifying the Korean peninsula: “[Syngman Rhee’s] posture toward Japan was conditioned by his desire for the unification of a divided nation and by the necessity of solidifying political power at home.”¹⁰³

There were other policies encouraging anti-Japanese sentiment; the 1948 National Traitors Law aimed at purging post-liberation Korea of the Koreans who had served the Japanese colonial administration.¹⁰⁴ Embittered by the success of these so-called Japanese collaborators (some were part of Rhee’s administration), this punishment was enthusiastically supported by most Koreans. However, the primary motivation behind the policy was not the widely advertised reason of removing “the colonial vestiges and establish[ing] a sound national spirit,” but partisan politics. Rhee’s opponents used the National Traitors Law to damage Rhee’s reputation as an ex-independence activist and legitimate leader of the new Republic of Korea, because most of his cabinet members used to work under the Japanese colonial government.¹⁰⁵ Resentful politicians began to accuse each other of being pro-Japanese: “Having been

¹⁰² Sung-hwa Cheong, The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991) xii-xiii, 4.

¹⁰³ Cheong, The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952 xii-xiii.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 10-11.

denied promised appointments to Rhee's cabinet, the [Korean Democratic Party] decided to capitalize on the public anti-Japanese sentiment to block Rhee's appointments by branding them as pro-Japanese officials."¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the National Traitors Law failed to punish those who were the real collaborators:

Although intended to eradicate the "pro-Japanese" from Korean society, the language of the bill was so broad as to apply to almost any person living in Korea under Japanese colonial rule; at the same time, it contained many loopholes designed to protect leading political figures.¹⁰⁷

Rhee realized that this bill "might cause internal disturbance" and due to the vagueness (mentioned above), almost any Korean could somehow find themselves in violation of the bill and be punished as a national traitor. However, the support was too great and the bill was passed.

Media

In 1948, the Korean media played a significant role in exacerbating the post colonial anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea. First, from March to April, in what is known as the Kobe Incident, the Japanese Ministry of Education demanded that all Korean schools in Japan subject themselves to the Japanese Education Standards Law, which required that all schools use Japanese texts and language in classrooms and make subjects regarding Korean culture, history, and language as parts of the extracurricular program. Those who did not comply would be shut down.

¹⁰⁶ Cheong, The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

This education reform roused fury among the Korean residents who considered this as a “continuation of the Japanese colonial assimilation policy.”¹⁰⁸ Violent protests against closed schools broke out in Kobe, eventually leading to the Governor being held hostage. Approximately two thousand Koreans were arrested and schools began to close. This incident provoked Korean newspapers to condemn the Japanese government and the American authorities’ siding with the Japanese, calling the Kobe Incident “an attack on Korean culture and...an attack on Korean independence;” they saw the incident as “evidence of the resurgence of Japanese imperialism.”¹⁰⁹

However, the media conveniently omitted the fact that it the ill will between Korea and Japan was mutual; the Japanese government was also struggling with the Korean residents who refused to be repatriated. Some of the Koreans remaining in Japan earned the government’s antagonism by engaging in various illegal activities and working with the Japanese Communist Party to instigate violent actions against the incumbent government.¹¹⁰ Without knowing Japan’s motivation for the harsh actions against the Korean residents, those in Korea only saw that their countrymen were victims of a foreign enemy nation that would not give up its hope of reconquering Korea.

A few months later, to fan the flames, Korean newspapers published a groundless report that some prominent Japanese officials who had worked in the Japanese Government General in Korea during the colonial period had returned to

¹⁰⁸ Cheong, The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

Korea under American auspices.¹¹¹ Koreans feared that the U.S. was allowing Japan to be re-armed to re-conquer Korea. The government used this as motivation when attacking the US for their insufficient support. In turn, the U.S. laid the blame on Communist activity, but the damage was already done; there were now anti-U.S. sentiments as well as anti-Japanese sentiments. Politicians who were vying to boost their popularity in the Korean interim government used these sentiments as a way to improve their standing with the people.

Distortion of information leads to the resentment of one nation toward another, affecting the economy, causing social unrest, and constant political conflicts, which ultimately hinder the development of the nation as a whole. Abusing the public's reactions and the ideology of nationalism for one's own benefit or revenge is also national exploitation.

A Matter of Perspective

Historical events can be interpreted in many different ways. There are so many sides in every conflict that it is nearly impossible to take a definitive moral stand, particularly when it comes to Japanese/Korean relations after World War II. Depending on factors such as the individual's location, time period, and religious beliefs, people's experiences of colonization vary.

Halmõni, born into a relatively wealthy family and raised in a simple farming town, lived a very comfortable life. All eight siblings were well fed and well educated (enough for two of them to study abroad in Japan); daughters were provided

¹¹¹ Cheong, The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952 5.

with rich dowries, and sons were given enough land to support their own families. Halmöni received a higher education than most girls in Korea at that time. Despite having lived through a tumultuous period of Korean history, she only knew about aggressive policies implemented by the Japanese authorities if they had directly affected her Christian life. Moreover, the situation in Korea was at its worst in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Japan had been significantly weakened after two consecutive wars.¹¹² Halmöni was in a rural area of Manchuria for most of that period, contributing to her lack of strong political views and general unawareness of the Korean political condition.

Location

In terms of location, those living nearer to the capital city, Seoul, would have felt the full effects of Japanese colonialism and therefore been more conscious of the political situation. In contrast, Halmöni was never fully aware of the fact that Korea was under a foreign power's control: "When I was little, I didn't know what nationalism was...My parents never told me anything regarding the nation." She grew up in a rural village in the southern part of the peninsula where politics were never widely discussed. Most of the villagers were farmers, whose only concern was when to sow the seeds, whether there was enough rain, when to harvest the grains, and how much they were going to be taxed that year. As long as they were not taxed too much, they were generally satisfied.

¹¹² 2nd Sino Japanese War (1937) and WWI (1941)

People in major cities, such as Seoul, Pyongyang, and Taegu were naturally more aware of Japanese aggression and injustice because they were the home cities of most of the country's intellectuals, where a strong infrastructure facilitated the dissemination of information. Another reason for higher awareness is the fact that foreign missionaries first arrived in the major cities. Christianity was accepted so quickly because of its association with foreign success; the intellectuals viewed it as a novel ideology that could lead to modernization and enrichment for Korea as it had in America: "Christianity was considered to be not a purely theological doctrine of the salvation of the soul but rather a quasi-political doctrine that might help the people protect their standard of living."¹¹³ Fueled with new activist thinking, independence activities such as the March First Movement in 1919 occurred. However, because of Halmöni's remote, rural location there was always a corresponding delay in response to newly implemented policies in her county.

In addition, Halmöni's lack of awareness can be attributed to the fact that she went to live in Manchuria during the 1940s, escaping the period when Japanese control in Korea was most intense. Because Manchuria was not yet an official part of the Japanese empire, the situation was not as bad as it was in Korea. Subsequently, Korean independence activities within Manchuria, such as Jilin, were not outlawed.¹¹⁴ Halmöni did not live in these politically active cities; rather, she lived in peaceful farming towns where thieves and opium addicts were the worst problems. While the Japanese could freely take away most of the grains as tax in Korea, they did not do the same in Manchuria. Halmöni mentions how shocked she was when she visited

¹¹³ Yi, "The Birth of the National Spirit of the Christians," 41.

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 2, p. 69.

her family in Korea after four years of living in Manchuria. While the Koreans were reduced to eating moldy barley and beans, Manchurian immigrants still had access to rice, vegetables, and sometimes meat.

Halmöni's first reaction was not anger at how deteriorated the Korean economy had become; rather, it was a resolve to leave Korea as soon as possible and return to Manchuria so she could "at least die on a full stomach." One's initial reaction might be: how could this woman be so selfish? How could she be so concerned about her own well-being while her country is being ravaged by parasitic colonizers? However, considering the circumstances of her youth, Halmöni was raised without a concrete conception of national identity. Furthermore, it is basic human nature to worry about one's own survival.

Time Period

Although Halmöni was born in 1921, eleven years after Japan annexed Korea, she was not greatly aware of the Japanese influence, because it did not fully penetrate the Korean peninsula until the 1930s and 1940s. Nonetheless, one of the assimilation policies that did affect Halmöni was the language policy.

Korean language books were gone by the time Halmöni was in fourth grade (the mid-1930s), and she was not allowed to speak Korean in school. Yet, it doesn't seem to bother her that much. She still spoke Korean at home. Halmöni was too young to realize that there was anything wrong with having to speak only Japanese in school. She didn't fully understand that this policy was an attempt by the Japanese to further assimilate the Koreans, by replacing Korean culture and language with their

own: “To me, there had always been Japanese living in Korea; they were there before I was born.” If she had been older, alive before the annexation and before the arrival of the Japanese, perhaps Halmöni would have felt resentment. And yet, even if she had known what Korea was like before it became a colony, it is probable that she still would not have been much more aware of the political situation; it was a time when women were never encouraged to participate in politics. But as it has been said, speculating about what could have been is futile.

Secondly, the fact that Halmöni was in Manchuria during the 1940s makes a significant difference in her political perspective. Since Japan invaded Northeast China in the 1930s, particularly after it gained Manchukuo through the Manchurian Incident in 1931, Japan had been straining its resources. Lacking her own capital to support both herself and Korea, Japan began exploiting Korea through heavy taxation and mining precious resources. Most of the profits from economic development or taxation were not reinvested in Korea, but went directly to Japan, Manchuria, or military maintenance expenses.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Koreans began to be conscripted into the Japanese military. Overall, Korea was a “vital factor in Japan’s war supply system.”¹¹⁶ Because Korea was such an imperative part of Japan’s imperialistic plans and economy, Japan grew increasingly worried about Korean resistance: “...Japan dare not permit any dangerous thoughts of independence among her colonial subjects”¹¹⁷ Japan was aware that there were Koreans in exile, who were waiting for

¹¹⁵ Nym Wales, "Rebel Korea," *Pacific Affairs* 15.1 (1942): 28-29.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

an opportunity to start a revolt as soon as either Soviet Russia or the United States declared war against Japan.¹¹⁸

Fortunately for Halmõni, she was able to avoid the effects of heavy taxation and political and social oppression. Although she was still in Korea during most of the 1930s, Halmõni was too young at the time to truly comprehend the situation, and by the time she grew up, she married and left for Manchuria. While the rest of her family were in Korea, impoverished and barely sustained by moldy beans, Halmõni enjoyed relative freedom and plentiful food in Northeast China. It was not until it neared the end of World War II that residents in Manchuria were required to attend war drills. On the whole, Halmõni remained unaware of the political tumult until she started her journey out of Manchuria, and even then, she still felt pity for the Japanese civilians forced to flee their homes.

Religion

Most of Halmõni's negative encounters with the Japanese were over the issue of religion. As a devout Christian, she became aware of political change only when the Japanese assimilation policies directly affected the Korean church, consequently affecting her family. Two main elements that were particularly upsetting to Halmõni were the enforcement of Shinto Shrine worship and the subsequent persecution of Christians.

Although Shinto had always been important to the Japanese, mandatory worship wasn't implemented in Korea until 1932. The Japanese never fully

¹¹⁸ Wales, "Rebel Korea," 25.

understood the reason for Korea's Christian fervor; because State Shinto was mostly a political ideology, granting legitimacy to the emperor. Such fervent spiritual loyalty to one God was perplexing to the Japanese. The Christians' resistance to bow before the Shinto shrines caused suspicion and was considered an outright defiance of Japanese rule.¹¹⁹

As history has shown countless times, often, people are not interested in global events until they directly affect their lives. Japanese hostility finally succeeded in drawing Halmöni's awareness through the persecution of Christianity. Halmöni was affected by the enforcement of Shinto worship in many ways. Schools and churches were closed down, ministers were arrested, and most importantly, her elder brother was forced to flee to Manchuria to escape religious persecution.

As an active member of the newly formed YMCA and leader of the youth group in the village church, Halmöni's elder brother was the perfect target for the Japanese persecution of political transgressors. When he was forced to leave home, Halmöni began to truly resent the harshness of Japanese rule.

In addition, the closure of churches and schools that Halmöni had attended when she was a child clearly demonstrated to her the extent of the policies' harshness. While she was in Manchuria, Halmöni assumed that nothing in Korea had changed since she left; Manchuria still had religious freedom. However, when she went back to Korea for a brief visit, she was shocked by how much had changed. Her father, who was a diligent worshipper, had stopped going to church because the ministers were afraid to preach. He worshipped alone in a little hut, on what was left of his

¹¹⁹ Allen D. Clark, A History of the Church in Korea (Seoul, Korea: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1971) 186-87.

vegetable field, withdrawing from society. The Bible was banned, the Ŭisŏng church and over 200 others were closed, the faithful had been imprisoned and/or martyred, and all the missionaries had been forced to return to their respective countries.

Despite the tumult, for Halmŏni, life was fairly idyllic. To her the Japanese were merely culturally baffling neighbors. Though she felt some ill-will for the Japanese authorities, Halmŏni harbored a stronger resentment toward her own countrymen, who ratted on her friends and family to the enemy. One's view of Japanese-Korean relations is mostly dependent on one's perspective. For example, the notorious Korean independence activist Ahn Jung-gun is considered a national hero and martyr in South Korea, so I was stunned to see a Western historian use the word "terrorism" in association with the accomplishments of this national hero: "Koreans are famous in the East as redoubtable terrorists, capable of extreme personal bravery and recklessness. The most spectacular Korean activities in the public press have been the recurrent assassinations and sabotage."¹²⁰ However, when I considered his actions from the Japanese perspective, I understood how one could see him as political criminal from the non-Korean perspective.

Halmŏni's views differ from the accepted Korean-Japanese historical narrative. Due to her religious identity, her extended absence from Korea, and personal experiences, Halmŏni has a different perception of the Japanese than what was considered typical for the period.

¹²⁰ Wales, "Rebel Korea," 37.

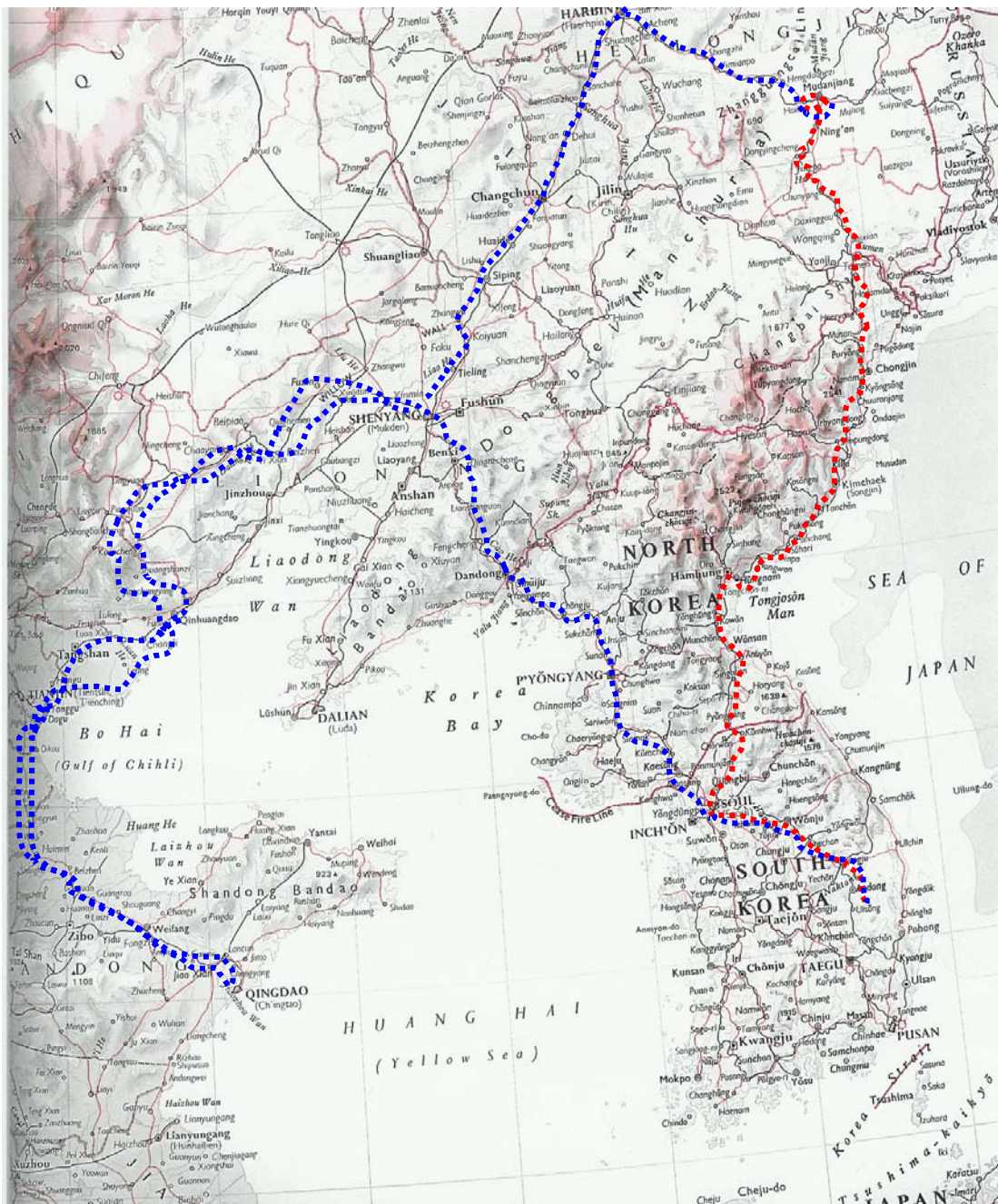
Epilogue

It seems as though everything happened just yesterday, but I find myself looking in the mirror and seeing a face that seems to be adding another wrinkle every minute. It has already been sixty years since I met Korea's independence on the road, and the little baby that I carried on my back is now an old man, himself, with lines around his eyes. When I see this, I feel that my time to leave this earth is closer than ever.

These chaotic times are merely the beginning of Halmõni's journey. Due to the time constriction, I could not write about Halmõni's life post-World War II, in which she survives the Korean War, loses her husband once again, sacrifices her son for the good of the war orphans, and finally reclaims him after twenty years. I had only known her as the old Halmõni, hard-of-hearing and reserved.

I am sure that every person from Halmõni's generation has a similar tale of tribulation, but to me, her story is special. If her strength had faltered, if she had jumped off that bridge, I would never have been born. She made it possible for me to live; in return, I shall carry her legacy, tell her story. Even after she is gone, the pulse of her life will live in me, and I will pass it on to future generations.

Map of Korea and Northeast China



- Following her new husband from Uisong, Korea to Mudanjiang, Manchukuo (1940).
- On the road out of Mudanjiang as a war refugee to her home in Uisong, Korea (1945).

*Map from (George Philip 67)

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